

SAA 2015: Shakespearean Parentage Abstracts  
Seminar Leader: Erin Ellerbeck

David Sterling Brown  
New York University  
dsb329@nyu.edu

Playing the Part in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*:  
Parents, Parenting and Alternative Family Structures

The felt absence of blood ties among family members in William Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* reinforces the notion that blood is sufficient for creating the family but it is, in fact, not *necessary* for creating or sustaining the family. In *Cymbeline*, parental authority exists primarily outside of the more conventional biological family construction. The various representations of non-biological parent-child relations, what Elizabeth Gager refers to as "fictive ties," reproduce the kind of surrogate bond that King James I asserts himself as having with his subjects in *Basilikon Doron*: He was the "natural father and kindly master" despite the absent blood ties. King James publicly promoted a socio-political alternative family model that was reflected in the period's literature; and he demonstrated with a top-down approach how an adult could appropriate fatherly, and motherly, roles. Non-biological family models take over James' imagination, as much as he uses them. *Cymbeline* also seems to reflect this focus on non-biological relations through the different types of family structures and parental models that it depicts: foster parenting, step parenting, an imagined or dream vision family and, of course, biological parenting. In this paper I will reflect on at least two of the ways that Shakespeare brings non-blood relations to the forefront in order to support my primary argument that biological relationships are one way to represent parent-child bonds but not *the* model for familial constructions in the early modern period.

Sara Keeth  
University of Texas at Dallas  
Slkeeth@gmail.com

"Engraving on the Heir"

Shakespeare uses monetary metaphors to describe parent and child in the Histories, from the engraving power of the mother to the interchangeability of heirs. In particular, *King John*, *Henry VIII* (1613) and *Edward III* (1593) contain interplay of maternal agency versus patriarchal institution in monetary metaphors.

In *Henry VIII*, the interchangeability of Henry's heirs is not dependent on the mother – any heir of Henry's born in wedlock is acceptable. The engraving power of the king on his offspring is evident in the old woman's assertion that baby Elizabeth is like him; however, her veracity is in service to her fiduciary need. After she receives money for her message, she

remarks, "Said I for this the girl was like to him? I'll / Have more, or else unsay't (H8 V.i.174-5). Infant Elizabeth may be the imprint of Henry, but the quality of that engraving is subject to judgment.

In *Edward III*, despite King Edward's roving eye, the queen's image is engraved so strongly on her son that his appearance causes King Edward to feel convicted, cooling the King's lust for another woman as strongly as the appearance of the Queen herself. Edward says the image of the queen in the prince's face is wealth enough, and he lacks the excuse of poverty to go and try to steal (the Countess) elsewhere. In *Coinage and State Formation in Early Modern English Literature*, Stephen Deng notes that the value of a coin is both intrinsic and extrinsic: the value of the metal that makes up the coin, and the monetary value that is marked on the coin. If this kind of valuation is transferred to heirs, it is the queen who engraves, but the king who provides the valuable raw material, which by extension provides the heirs with the power of interchangeability.

James J. Marino  
Cleveland State University  
jamesjmarino@yahoo.com

#### What the Ghost Wants: *Hamlet*

Traditional psychoanalytic readings of *Hamlet* have been interested in only one character's psychology. But if, as Freud claims, *Hamlet* is *Oedipus Rex*, then the King is its Oedipus: the ruler compulsively unraveling a riddle whose answer is his own guilt and destruction. The question "Why does Hamlet wait?" invites the corollary "Why does the King act?" Faced with an antagonist incapable of acting against him, the King doggedly hurries the plot toward its (and his) catastrophe. In doing so, the King ultimately provokes his own death at young Hamlet's hands, and so fulfills the command of his ghostly brother.

If *Hamlet* descends from *Oedipus*, it descends through Seneca's *Oedipus*, and old Hamlet is part of a long line of Senecan ghosts. What Seneca's Ghost of Laius wants is the death of all his heirs and the extinction of his family line. Old Hamlet sets one of his two male heirs to kill the other, and makes clear that the crown Claudius wears is *his*, the old Hamlet's and not the young's. Young Hamlet, explicitly commanded to avenge and implicitly forbidden to inherit, literally cannot succeed. The Ghost wishes no successors. "Success" would require Hamlet to either renounce the Ghost, betraying him by outliving him, or to die himself. Hamlet responds by passively goading the King toward action, playing on Claudius's Laius-like hostility until Hamlet provokes his own murder. Only at the moment that Hamlet himself becomes the ghost of Hamlet, walking the stage but already "slain," can he resolve his conflicts and avenge his own murder.

Marianne Novy  
University of Pittsburgh  
mnovy@pitt.edu

## Reflections on Mothers in Shakespeare

### 1. Who's blaming mothers?

Shakespeare's plays often include language in which characters project culturally scorned aspects of themselves onto women. Often this projection is specifically onto mothers. They may criticize themselves for resembling their mothers in their closeness to tears, or criticize other characters for resembling their mothers, for example in talking too much. Or, in cases of suspected adultery, the complaint may be more general. There are fewer negative descriptions of resemblance to fathers. But Goneril and Regan are described by the fool as kin to their father because they all would have him whipped, while on the other hand the similarity between Mistress Page and her daughter, both able to achieve goals by trickery, is treated as something the audience would more likely enjoy than condemn. In the case of many of the insults, the issue is a general and persistent prejudice against women, or perhaps talkative women like Queen Margaret. Perhaps the fact that several of these insults are uttered by a murderer, indeed a murderer of children, might work against acceptance of their biases. Volumnia may be the mother whose bad (though culturally reinforced) influence is clearest, and in recent productions she may discover this herself, giving her an unspoken self-recognition comparable to Lear's spoken one.

### 2. Where are the mothers in Shakespeare? (arguing with Mary Beth Rose, mostly on the comedies)

Shakespeare's genres vary in the roles they give to mothers. The greatest disproportion, and the one most often noted, is the one in the comedies, between the absence of mothers and the presence of fathers. These are also the plays in which young women are most prominent. This absence of mothers has been explained in terms of the male dominance of Shakespeare's society and the high rate of female mortality—the first a more plausible factor than the second. But it is worth considering also the frequent absence of mothers in sources, the wish for dramatic intensity in the young woman's relationship with her father and her friends, and also, of course, the limited resources of Shakespeare's acting company.

However, it is arguable that the influence of the absent mother returns in some of Shakespeare's plays. Mothers are mentioned with praise or identification in *As You Like It*, *Much Ado*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*. More importantly, Shakespeare adds mothers to his source in *The Comedy of Errors*, *Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *All's Well that Ends Well*.

Mary Beth Rose concludes that in Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies "maternal desire and agency, conceived solely in terms of the private domain, can be represented visibly (corporeally) only as dangerous, subordinate, or peripheral in relation to public, adult life... The

best mother is an absent or a dead mother, and the ideal society is based upon the sacrifice of the mother's desire."<sup>1</sup> I argue for qualifications to this view.

Sara B.T. Thiel  
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign  
bolandt2@illinois.edu

### The Queen's Two Bodies: Wielding Maternal Power in the Stuart Court

Whitehall Palace, January 6, 1605: Queen Anna of Denmark performs in *The Masque of Blackness*, written by Ben Jonson and designed by Inigo Jones to commemorate Twelfth Night. This court celebration was to mark the first collaboration between the three performance visionaries. While the *Masque of Blackness* was neither Anna's first court commission nor her performance debut, it remains unique as the first and only time the queen consort publicly danced in blackface. Further complicating Anna's performance is the fact she was six months pregnant with Princess Mary and on the brink of entering confinement for her final trimester when she danced *The Masque of Blackness*. While many scholars have analyzed Anna's display of racialized foreignness, few have considered her blackface in relation to her visible pregnancy. Situating *The Masque of Blackness* within the context of Jacobean court politics, I analyze Anna's pregnant performance as an affirmation of her own political and maternal agency.

I read Anna's pregnant, raced performance through two early modern political and biological systems of thought: the theory of the king's two bodies and the theory of maternal impressions, respectively. In so doing, I suggest that *Blackness* offers valuable insight into the ways in which the mysteries of the pregnant body simultaneously offer the security of peaceful dynastic succession as well as actively threaten the unity desired by an absolute patriarchal monarchist such as James I. I suggest that, upon James's ascension to the throne in 1603, the pregnant body in performance comes to signify not only the promise of peaceful dynastic perpetuation, but also a symbol of maternal power eliciting patriarchal anxiety.

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<sup>1</sup> Rose, "Where are the Mothers?" 307.