Who’s Your Daddy?:
An Analysis of Shakespeare’s Fathers in Power Positions and Their Parental Relationship to Their Daughters

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William Shakespeare and his plays, taught in high schools across America every year, researched by historians for centuries, and enjoyed by classical literature lovers to no end, have been and will continue to be, I imagine, seen as a standard of English Literature. Through endearing readers with a variety of characters easy to connect to, and drawing upon classic themes and relatable storylines, Shakespeare has managed to form a robust foundation of enthusiasts and supporters from around the world. His plays, the objects of study for over 400 years now, provide a unique look into not only Shakespeare’s own time and culture, but into human nature itself. Family dynamics, lovers’ woes, tragedy and triumph— all are found in the thousands of lines Shakespeare has left the world with. All that we choose to pull from those lines varies, but I find a few certain topics to be particularly intriguing for the purpose of exploration. According to Sharon Hamilton, “Shakespeare’s tyrannical fathers . . . value pride in their familial authority and social image over their children’s feelings.” (7). This pattern of valuing authority would surface through the fathers in positions of power across almost every Shakespeare play. And it’s this authority and desire for control that has drastic affects on the parental relationships of these men.

This thesis aims to explore and examine four of the father-daughter relationships found within Shakespeare’s plays. Looking at reasons for control, the connections between father and daughter, and types of reconciliation, I hope to gain a better understanding of how fathers with power interact with and treat their daughters, as well as how those daughters respond. Ultimately, I believe these father-daughter relationships fail unless the father undergoes some sort of transformation that helps him see the damaging control he tries to extract from his daughter or daughters. Only once this occurs are they able to have a healthy and happy connection with their daughters. As we look at each of the four plays and their pair
of parent-child connections, we see how these various relationships provide an inside look at control, forgiveness, and transformation within these four Shakespeare plays.

In order to understand the father-daughter relationships revealed in these plays, it is prudent to have a base knowledge of the way these relationships typically looked during Shakespeare’s time. Women of this era (approximately 1550-1620) had a unique political position. Encouraged to work, get an education, allowed to own property, able to inherit their fathers valuables, and free to speak their mind, the state of women’s social positions offered Shakespeare an open opportunity to comment on and play with women’s roles within various settings (Greenblatt, 10). Despite these freedoms these women simultaneously felt the weight of a still deeply embedded sexist society. While able to speak their voice, they faced violent opposition if they voiced views that were not popular with the majority of males in their society. Greenblatt informs us that, “women who asserted their views too vigorously risked being perceived as shrewish and labeled ‘scolds’.” Women who were seen this way, i.e. as a threat to public order, were subject to public humiliation, physical abuse, and the local authorities. In fact, the cucking stool would become an almost exclusive punishment for women. Public shaming for being labeled a ‘scold’ or a ‘shrew’ was also common. For a young woman attempting to learn her place in society, the environment fostered for her wasn’t very safe or accepting. She would have to learn to conform to the boundaries set by men more powerful than her, or risk a fearful varying degree of negative response. According to Greenblatt, how a woman should act, though at length debated and discussed by various societal groups, was generally agreed upon by both men and women as “chaste, dutiful, shamefast, and silent.” One thing Shakespeare explores in many of his plays, including the
ones we are looking at, is whether or not the daughter fulfills these expectations and what happens when she doesn’t.

Pinning that understanding against the father’s typical role during this time, the father would be expected to provide for, protect, and have control over his household and family. As a father and a king, a man would be expected to do all those things not just for his family, but also for an entire kingdom of people. Kings at this time had absolute power: power to make important political, social, economical, and religious decisions and power to control his subjects, which would have been anyone living in his kingdom. This complete reign of control allowed the king to do pretty much whatever he wanted: giving way to feelings of safety in absolute power, security in surrounding themselves with trusted kinsmen, and comfort in being the highest source of authority in the land. As Greenblatt concludes, “Under such circumstances, the sovereign’s dream was to command, like God, not only unquestioning obedience but unqualified love.” (10). The men in Shakespeare’s play which I am analyzing fall into powerful positions either as king or magician, and are given that much more power when viewed as kings and fathers. Keeping these things in mind, for a woman to speak against her father, especially if that father were king, would be for her to risk social ridicule, safety, and public and private punishment from not just her father but also from her whole society. As a figure of control, these fathers would be expected to uphold order and respect from their daughters. Any threat to that control would jeopardize their ability, esteem, and security in ruling others. The results of what happens when a father is given absolute power, and then forced to interact with their daughter— who may or may not fulfill his expectations— is what these upcoming sections focus on.

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A Midsummer Night’s Dream comes at the peak of Shakespeare’s career—near the time of Romeo and Juliet and Richard II, and this romantic comedy would become one of Shakespeare’s most well known plays. While A Midsummer Night’s Dream doesn’t have a father in a king position, the father uses his power in a unique way that makes it worth looking into. Comparing the authority he does have with an actual king within the play, as well as looking at his relationship with his daughter will help us gain a better understanding of the other fathers.

Within A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Egeus, the only real father in the play, is incredibly insecure about and concerned with his power. The play begins with Egeus, “full of vexation” (A Midsummer Night’s Dream, 1.1, 23), coming before the duke, Theseus, with a complaint against his daughter, Hermia. It seems Hermia has fallen in love with a man Egeus doesn’t approve of. Furthermore, she refuses to marry the man Egeus has deemed worthy of her hand in marriage. Egeus’s anger towards Hermia appears to stem from a fear of losing control—Hermia will not do as he asks. And so, with his authority lacking strength, he submits her to a higher authority: the duke. Egeus asks the duke that if Hermia not agree to marry Demetrius, the man he’s chosen, she would be killed. The duke’s response to Hermia seems strict—and to be in agreement with Egeus—but nonetheless he gives Hermia some more time to think about her decision and provides her another way out: celibacy as a nun. Theseus’s response to Hermia is this:

What say you, Hermia? Be advised, fair maid.

To you your father should be as a god,

One that composed your beauties, yea, and one

To whom you are but as a form in wax,

By him imprinted, and within his power
To leave the figure or disfigure it,

Demetrius is a worthy gentleman. (1.1, 46-52).

Theseus’s support of Egeus and of the law (1.1, 47, 50) suggests he’d be willing to follow through with Egeus’s demand if Hermia cannot be convinced. Hermia’s argument, that Lysander is just as good of a gentlemen as Demetrius, comes soon after. In appealing to Theseus’s power by apologizing for her boldness, “Hermia cunningly uses her father’s faith in hierarchy against him.” (Hamilton, 39). Theseus at least attempts to change Hermia’s mind, giving her a chance. Theseus and Hermia debate for a while before Theseus takes a firm stand on Egeus’s side. In concluding their conversation, he tells her to “take time to pause” and really think about what she wants to do. She must:

    prepare to die
    For disobedience to your father’s will,
    Or else wed Demetrius, as he would,
    Or on Diana’s altar to protest
    For aye austerity and single life. (1.1 83, 86-90).

Theseus, though he can see Hermia’s point, has little choice to show Hermia grace for her decision, especially after another man has come to him asking for his authority.

    Theseus’s power, and Egeus’s decision to go to him for authority, almost puts him in a father-figure position to Hermia. In a way, Egeus is giving up his fatherhood and handing it to Theseus. Responding better to Hermia than Egeus ever does in the play, Theseus is at least willing to admit that Lysander is just as worthy of a gentleman as Demetrius, “In himself he is, /But in this kind, wanting your father’s voice, / The other must be held the worthier.” (1.1, 53-55). While he’s able to see Hermia’s argument, he backs Egeus and tells her, “Rather your eyes must with his judgment look.” (1.1, 57). He agrees with the traditional patriarchal system that
was established at this time, but he also isn’t hell-bent on Hermia marrying Demetrius, unlike Hermia’s stubborn father. Hermia and her lover then retreat to the forest to escape her father’s domineering agenda. They don’t make it very long in the forest and return back to town where Theseus and Egeus are waiting. Egeus, always concerned with getting his way so he can feel in control, again asks Theseus to bring the law upon their heads. This time, he wants Lysander punished too. Attempting to enlist Demetrius in punishing Hermia and Lysander for their actions, we see a lack of transformation in his heart towards Hermia. Rather, he continues in his dominating attitude towards the couple. Demetrius, now in love with Helena, is no longer willing to support Egeus. In addition to losing Demetrius’s support, Theseus also changes his mind about siding with Egeus. Overriding Egeus’s will, and instead doing quite the opposite, Theseus bids Lysander and Hermia marry— the idea of punishing Hermia is completely off the table. In this change from the plot’s direction, our hope is that Theseus would continue to sympathize with Hermia’s side and even perhaps allow a change in the law just this once. According to Hamilton, “The poet’s alliance with the lover and with the father-figure who would promote wedded bliss, so early claimed, held firm.” (42). Whether Theseus was caught up in love, he himself getting married, or whether he realizes how ridiculous Egeus’s request is, he chooses to let Hermia have her way. In doing so, Hamilton argues, “the duke . . . assumes the parental role.” (41). Lagretta Lenker even goes so far to say that Theseus jeopardizes his own power, undermining the principle that grants his own authority, in doing this (Lenker, 148). Theseus’s power comes from those underneath him, mainly from the men he can control. By choosing to let Hermia, a woman, have her way, he jeopardizes his respect from those men, especially Egeus. Fortunately for Theseus, the story’s ending solidifies his authority, and Egeus continues to submit to Theseus’ will. After the duke’s decision to have the lovers marry, Lenker says:
Egeus departs without saying a word; and thus Theseus effectively silences the father, the law he represents, and the male alliance that reinforces this law. This unusual muting of the patriarchy recalls Boose and Flowers’ precept that the person most dangerous to patriarchal order is the father himself. Theseus, titular head and father figure of his dukedom, wittingly or unwittingly, commits the cardinal sin in the patriarchal order: he upholds the daughter’s choice. For although Theseus hears the explanations of the young men about the strange events that took place in the forest, and although Theseus speaks to Egeus, not Hermia, in delivering his revolutionary decision, the daughter’s will is affirmed, albeit by the patriarch himself. (Lenker, 150). Theseus isn’t scared to lose his control; he is confident in his ability to do whatever he desires, even if it contradicts social and political norms. And unlike Egeus, he remains in control till the very end.

In the wake of the following events, it seems Egeus loses any claim on influence or power within the play. Egeus’s last appearance on stage is in suggesting various plays to Theseus. When he recommends Theseus not view a particular play, Theseus once more overrides Egeus’s wishes and chooses to see it, again demonstrating his control over the men beneath him. Egeus is not mentioned again and does not have any further lines after Theseus insists on seeing this play. In response to Theseus’s decision, Hamilton states, “Egeus says nothing; his silence shows that he has been completely thwarted.” (41). I imagine he is left dejected and unhappy with the outcome of events. In the end, we are left with no reconciliation between Hermia and Egeus—they just go their own ways. Hermia’s violation of Egeus’s wishes and leaving town without informing him would have only further disturbed his anger-fueled mindset. I don’t imagine Hermia being too happy with her father after he asks the law to fall on her head, even though she got her way and was able to marry the man she
wanted. Egeus and Hermia’s relationship doesn’t seem mendable. Without having Theseus to back him up on the court’s side of things, Egeus has no power over Hermia anymore. We are left wondering if he has any power remaining, or if he even had any to begin with.

Egeus’s two options— marry Demetrius or receive a death sentence— aren’t what I imagine a loving father would impose on his daughter. Rather, Egeus seems to be concerned with power and control. Feeling threatened by Hermia’s refusal to consent to his will, he fears he will lose any power he has over her. By submitting his authority to the duke’s, he submits his power over his daughter to the duke, allowing him to enforce the control. Juxtaposing this father with another father within one of the plays we’ll be looking at, Polixenes, Morris Partee reminds us, “Polixenes admits that a son should be able to choose a wife for himself, but he goes on to affirm that the love that all fathers feel for their posterity merits their being consulted.” (114). Egeus, on the other hand, believes his daughter should have no choice in who she gets to marry. As a woman, she gets no say in her male father’s wishes.

Egeus’s possessive nature, “as she is mine” (1.1, 42) (1.1, 97), “her obedience which is due to me” (1.1, 37), fuels this destructive desire for control he has. It is this “pride of possession” that, according to Hamilton, would lead him to Theseus (38). Unwilling to risk what little control he does have, he is willing to submit his own power to someone with more of it— the duke. In my mind, this proves the depths to which Egeus’s desire for control goes. He brings his daughter, essentially, to court, in order to get his way. Perhaps he will feel like less of a man if he cannot have control over the women below his social status as a man, and as a father. Egeus seems to care less about having a healthy and strong relationship with Hermia than he does having control over her. Hermia is even willing to skip town and run away with Lysander, leaving her father behind, so their ties must not have been strong enough to keep her there. It’s not hard for her to choose Lysander over her father. Granted, her father
makes that decision pretty easy by asking Theseus to threaten her with death if she doesn’t conform to his will. Hermia and Egeus’s relationship prior to this play isn’t discussed, but if she’s refusing to submit to his will and he’s willing to bring her to court to get his way—and risk her choosing death and therefore losing his (what I assume, only) daughter—then it must not have been very good. He must have known what bringing Hermia before the ultimate authority in the county must have meant for their relationship: what I imagine to be an irreparable gorge between them. In addition, neither is shown to communicate directly with one another: Theseus is their mediator.

The sort of relationship painted here seems to be the common, “don’t hold love too close or you’ll crush it” idea. Egeus’s will crushed Hermia so much so that she had to leave town in order to get what she wanted: happiness. Egeus would stop at nothing, not even her death, to get his will done. The sort of love he has for her—if any—is very selfish. His desire for power overrides his ability to love her well. He can’t put her desires first, because he’s putting his own first. He can’t even see her logic clearly because he’s blinded by getting his own way. I imagine Egeus’s pride is far too hurt in being dismissed by the duke to try to move towards Hermia and her new husband. I believe this is what happens when the father figures lack any sort of transformation into a ‘better man’. They are unable to move forward out of their old ways of thinking, see the errors of their ways, and therefore aren’t able to have a good relationship with their daughter. Unlike the other fathers in the plays I’m examining, Egeus fails to grow, leaving ending of the play little to no room for healing to occur between the two.

The power trip that Egeus goes on is what ultimately destroys whatever was left of his relationship with his daughter. Rather than gaining the political backing Theseus might have had to offer, going to the duke resulted in what I imagine was his worst nightmare. Egeus
didn’t get any sort of happy ending, unlike all the other characters. While Theseus is no doubt a very controlling and manipulative character (he captures his wife in battle), in relation to Hermia he is a much more gracious father-figure. Even Demetrius, though he denies Helena time after time, still gets the girl in the end (even if it is only because of some fairy magic). Egeus is the only one who leaves the stage absolutely miserable, and I think it’s because he’s so focused on his ability to control; his heart is so stubborn and unwilling to move towards his daughter in any way. A father who is willing to put his daughter to death rather than see her be happy does not get the happy ending the other characters do. He is unwilling to change or transform his heart, and it is because of this that he does not get the reconciliation with his daughter. In the other three plays I’ll be looking at, at least some form of transformation occurs with the father figures. Whether or not they get their “happy ending” is something that will be explored in later paragraphs.

Written right around 1610, *The Tempest* was a romantic comedy tracing the story of a man and his daughter on a remote island and their hopeful journey back to civilization. This play is traditionally seen as a coming of age story (Hamilton, 24). In comparison to the other plays I’ll be discussing, *The Tempest* has the least amount of father-daughter drama, and surprisingly, there is very little to no conflict between the two. This relationship is unique in that way, and in the type of control the father takes. Looking deeper at the root of the power plays, we can begin to see the motives behind this father’s control and how that affects the daughter and her role.

The play begins with a shipwreck caused by a powerful magician, a magician who uses his powers to selfishly control those around him. But this was no natural disaster; using his powers to change the forces of nature, Prospero manipulates the weather and the seas into
overtaking this ship. Prospero was left to fend for himself after his brothers took over his dukedom in Milan. Taking Prospero and his 3-year-old daughter, Miranda, to sea, his brother abandoned them on an island. Thankfully, one of Prospero’s counselor’s, Gonzalo, gave Prospero some supplies and Prospero’s magician books before they got to the island. It was within these books that Prospero would harness the power to control things, situations, and people around him. Stephen Greenblatt argues, “Prospero’s power, Caliban reasons, derives from his superior knowledge.” (3061). He would store up his power and plot for years before taking back his former position as Duke and exacting his revenge on those who did him harm. We learn all these things as Prospero tells them to his daughter for the first time in a lengthy story telling session just after the shipwreck has occurred. Before Prospero explains who the men on the shipwrecked boat are, Miranda is incredibly worried about them. And rather than continuing to be worried, or even more worried, she completely lets her fear go when her father tells her he made the ship wreck and he has brought them here so he can get his revenge on them and resume his power as the Duke of Milan.

Prospero has a plan to make things ‘right’ and he will stop at nothing to make that plan accomplished. After explaining how they have ended up on the island, Prospero makes sure that the son (Ferdinand) of the man who took away his kingdom (the King of Naples) is separated after they have been shipwrecked. Prospero orchestrates Ferdinand and Miranda meeting and they instantly fall in love, though Ferdinand’s feelings are due to the charm Prospero put over him. Ferdinand, demeaned and manipulated by Prospero’s power, responds surprisingly well. Greenblatt agrees, “the magician makes the experience menacing, humiliating, and frustrating.” (3058). Miranda, never suspecting her father’s powers might have to do with anything, moves to hasten her relationship with Ferdinand as quickly as she can by purposing soon after they meet.
Because of their banishment to the island, Miranda had a childhood void of much female interaction, allowing Prospero to raise her however he wished. Growing up with only her father and his subjects on the island drastically affected how she would interact with others once they reach the island. Though Miranda had a few female attendants before she ended up on the island, she would never get to experience a mother’s love or her advice on things (The Tempest, 1.2, 46-47). This lack of a mother, of any sort of female influence, means she had no example of how to carry herself, of how to live, of how to interact with men, as a woman should. All she knew was what her father told her or showed her. Knowing how Prospero likes to control, he would have been biased in how he teaches Miranda to obey him, or even in how he teaches her to support him in controlling her. Both Hamilton and Lenker argue that Prospero and Miranda’s relationship is a healthy, good one (28; 97, 110). However, I don’t agree with the degree to which they argue that. I don’t doubt that Prospero loves Miranda in some way— the evidence for that is decently strong (caring for Miranda for 15 years, his concern over their pure marriage bed) — but where I believe these authors ‘ analyses of Prospero aren’t complete is looking at all of Prospero’s motives and taking into account the darkness that lurks behind his seemingly ‘good’ or ‘noble’ actions.

Prospero never seems to lose control on the island. Everything works according to his will. Ferdinand and Miranda’s entire love story is all in Prospero’s plan. And why? Is it so that Miranda can be happy? So that Miranda has a choice to pick from any man she wants? Or is it so they can get off the island, and Prospero can ensure he will have power off of it? Hamilton and Lenker argue that Prospero’s control over this entire play is because he loves Miranda and wants her to be happy (Lenker, 110, Hamilton, 24-34). I’m not convinced that’s what Prospero’s main motive is. I think Prospero knew he’d have to give his daughter away eventually if he ever wanted to get off the island. Lenker says, “...because the power of the
possessive father is also dangerous and potentially abusive and stifling, the patriarch— like the playwright and the magus regarding art and magic— must ultimately relinquish his daughter.” (94). But he realized through his power, he could determine who Miranda would marry— and use her to his advantage once they got off the island. If he could get Miranda to marry someone with power, then Prospero, too, would have power. Prospero used his powers and the excuse of taking revenge on those who had taken control from him to manipulate the situation into getting him off the island with more power than he had even had before he got there.

I believe Prospero’s actions— fueled by a desire for revenge and for control— are nothing less than manipulative. Lenker argues: “Prospero’s art succeeds, however, because it is thoroughly planned and executed for noble reasons.” (95). To me, it seems Prospero’s plan prevails because of the drastic amount of control he has on this island. His enslavement of the native ‘monster’, Caliban, and of the fairy, Ariel, even if beginning out of something nice (rescuing Ariel from being stuck in a tree, attempting to treat Caliban with kindness when he first meets him), show that the power and controlling nature of Prospero’s entrapment isn’t something a “good guy” or “good father figure” would do. Granted, Caliban did try to rape Miranda, so I understand the harsh tone Prospero’s actions take further on in the play. However, Prospero made Caliban his slave upon reaching the island, before all of that. Caliban was put under Prospero’s power— with no choice, before he had done anything wrong. Treating your slave ‘nicely’ (before the attempted rape of your daughter) still doesn’t condone having a slave. Ariel, because Prospero used his power to save him, is forced to do Prospero’s every bidding. That is not a kind, loving relationship. It is a self—seeking, manipulative, and unjust way of interacting with someone. With Miranda, controlling her every move has always been Prospero’s desire. Just because Miranda happens to love Ferdinand doesn’t mean it’s
“noble” for Prospero to use his powers to manipulate Ferdinand into loving her. Greenblatt thinks, “control is purchased by constant discipline.” (3058). This “discipline” is harshness in how he deals with his slaves, and manipulation in how he deals with the other humans on the island, including his daughter. Prospero’s actions are always self-seeking, as I will discuss further in this section.

Miranda is either blind to or doesn’t mind Prospero’s control over those around him or of her. With Miranda there is no rebellion or threat. Once Ferdinand and Miranda have fallen in love he tells Ferdinand to “take heed” to not break her “virgin knot” before they are wed (The Tempest, 4.1, 15, 22). He takes careful note not to mention the goddess of sex and fertility when he is explaining to them how they will be blessed if they wait to have sex until they are married. He does this, of course, after he threatens the two of them with a marriage bed of “barren hate, /sour-eyed disdain, and discord” (The Tempest, 4.1, 19-20). The protection he is showing here over her innocence doesn’t seem to be something he gave to Miranda when Caliban tried to rape her. Whether or not this care about her ‘virgin knot’ is all a show, or whether Prospero genuinely wants to keep her innocence as long as he can, is hard to determine. If they do not wait, and Ferdinand’s father finds out, he will deem Miranda unclean and unworthy of his son. Prospero would then lose the chance to leave the island with Miranda as a princess and a promised dukedom, leaving him with little power once again. Miranda now holds a large amount of Prospero’s power and opportunity, and he is scaring and tricking her into doing what he wants.

Fortunately, his daughter is not a threat to him because she will do whatever Prospero wants— unlike the daughters in the other plays I’m looking at. Miranda poses no danger to him or his power. He knows he can control her well enough both on and off the island with whatever power he may have. While on the island, she doesn’t question his authority or his
motives; she goes along with his plans as a submissive daughter ‘should’, just as he has taught her to. Miranda isn’t looking to take away his power or even gain any of her own— unlike the daughters in King Lear. Rather than seeing Miranda as a threat, Prospero sees Miranda as an opportunity: an opportunity to get what he wants, an opportunity to get off the island and have his kingdom back, an opportunity to have even more control over others as duke.

His daughter is included in this struggle for control and manipulation, but she is not the only focus of control he has. He is incredibly concerned with getting his kingdom back and seeking revenge on those who have taken his power from him. In that way, he seeks to control the men who have wronged him. This provides an interesting position— that Prospero doesn’t want to just control his daughter but also men. In fact, he uses Miranda to get power over other men. Most of the other father figures have looked to gain power over their daughters in a much bigger way, and though Prospero does it’s in a very different way. Firstly, there is no large conflict between him and Miranda to work through. Prospero never kicked Miranda off the island and Miranda never tried to steal his books or his cloak to obtain his power. Secondly, his transformation is much less to do with an intellectual or emotional change towards her or others as it has to do with a shift in power. Prospero never has to go through a transformation quite like King Lear or King Leontes do; in a way he doesn’t need to. While his loss is similar to King Lear’s (a loss of power) he never loses his daughter; his child never rebels. The transformation he does undergo involves a strengthening of his power while he is removed from his kingdom. He may have lost his kingdom but here, on this island, he is king. Here he has his power back. He regains full control of his kingdom through his own cunning and manipulation of others. He doesn’t seem discouraged by his predicament on the island; he seems to have full confidence in his ability to restore himself and his power again. In The Tempest, Prospero’s faith lies in himself too— though this time in his own ability to
manipulate and control those around him with magic. Hamilton argues that Prospero has “comparable belief in his own authority” (34). Prospero functions out of a trust in himself and his own powers to get what he wants. Any fear that he might fail is not mentioned in the play, leading us to assume that Prospero has full confidence in himself. He is sure in his ability to control and manipulate others in order to accomplish his plan. Greenblatt states: “That Prospero restrains himself from the full exercise of his power to harm his enemies, that he breaks his magic staff and drowns his book, is his highest moral achievement, a triumphant display of self-mastery.” (3058). I disagree with Greenblatt, I think Prospero is so sure of himself and the power he will have off the island, that he is even willing to give up his books and staff here on the island. He has a promised power off the island— where he doesn’t need his magic. He doesn’t have to give up much; he’s going right back into power. In the end, though, Prospero does give up getting an even stronger revenge on his enemies. I do think giving up these things does mean something to Prospero’s character. However, I don’t think he’s as noble as many try to make him out to be. He’s giving up a little of his power, he’s not seeking the absolute worst revenge he could. In giving up a little power, and giving up how cruel he could be towards his enemies, he gains a little promise of relationship with his daughter. A relationship that will gain him the title of ‘father to a princess’—a title with power.

When the daughter supports the father— the father uses that to his advantage, like Prospero. When the daughter doesn’t support the father— or worse, poses as a threat to his power— even more drastic control and manipulation is attempted and according to Lenker: “…the interior drama in Shakespeare’s father--daughter relationships apparently reinforces the power of the patriarch to control and manipulate.” (95). Leaving the reader with a “happy” ending for all in The Tempest, this complicates the way we think about Prospero’s character.
Whether or not Prospero is “good” or “bad” or if he undergoes a transformation is harder to understand. The patriarch as controlling and power-hungry isn’t limited to just The Tempest or A Midsummer Night’s Dream. As we continue exploring, other father figures fall into this category as well.

King Leontes, another power-hungry father, prefers getting rid of his ‘problems’, i.e. threats to his power, rather than dealing with them. When he begins to suspect his wife, Hermione, of cheating on him with his best friend, the King of Bohemia, he throws her in jail. She is, as far as the audience knows, bearing King Leontes’ child, but the king has gotten it into his head that she is pregnant with the King of Bohemia’s child: “for ’tis Polixenes/ Has made thee swell thus.” (The Winter's Tale, 2.1, 62-63). Polixenes, warned by Camillo that Leontes wants to kill him, flees the country with Camillo. Leontes banishes his wife to jail and in attempting to control anyone who might disagree with him, he exerts his power over those of his court: “Away with her to prison! / He who shall speak for her is afar-off guilty, / But that he speaks.” (2.1, 105-108). And then, like Cordelia in King Lear, Hermione foreshadows the unveiling of truth in predicting, “I never wished to see you sorry; now/ I trust I shall” before she is taken away (2.1, 125-126). Even with her banishment, Hermione isn’t cruel or vengeful. She is forgiving from the very beginning. This attitude will be necessary for any future chance of reconciliation.

Keeping control over his wife, he forces her to give birth to her daughter, Perdita, in jail. When Paulina, a counselor to the king and friend of the queen, brings the king’s daughter to him but he wants nothing to do with her or his child; he instead asks his lords to remove the woman from his court. When Paulina lingers in defense and reason despite Leontes’s orders to leave court, Leontes asks Antigonus (Paulina’s husband): “What, canst not rule her?”
Leontes believes a husband should always be in control, in ‘rule’ over, his wife. When Paulina freely speaks her mind— and calls out Leontes for what he’s doing— Leontes questions Antigonus’s ability to control his wife. If she speaks her mind— and her mind goes against the king— she needs to be ‘ruled’, quieted. Again, after Paulina refuses to stay silent, Leontes comments on Antigonus’s lack of reprimand towards his wife: “He dreads his wife.”

Only a man scared of his wife would let her speak freely. If Leontes has this mindset, it makes sense why he would banish a wife who he feels might be unfaithful. He has every right to ‘rule’ his wife, and when she does something that might jeopardize his control over her, he exerts his control over her in a way she can’t argue with: jail.

Despite Paulina’s attempts, Leontes wants his daughter thrown into the fire as a means of disposing of her— ‘fixing’ the threat to his power. And though he threatens Antigonus, “bring me word ‘tis done, / And by good testimony, or I’ll seize thy life,” (2.3, 137) his lords push back on his demand, asking that Leontes “give [them] better credit” (2.3, 147). Relenting only a little, the king allows the child be disposed of in the wilderness rather than be thrown into the fire. Leontes’s possible unfaithful wife, his possible child, and a counselor who isn’t afraid of him all face banishment. Any female that poses a risk to his power— whether by making him look bad (wife) or by her exerting her own power over him (Paulina) — gets some form of banishment. Because he is king and there is no higher power in the country for him to look to, he simply forces them out of his court. In his domain of power he will not tolerate insubordination. Fearing losing control over those around him, he demands and threatens— banishing women left and right.

Convinced he is right and wanting everyone to support his powerful decision, Leontes consults an oracle to publically agree with him that his wife and best friend have been unfaithful. However, upon the oracle’s insistence that they are innocent and that the king will
have no heirs until his lost child is found, Leontes’s heart only continues to harden. Leontes refuses to see reason. Blinded by his possessive nature of Hermione—which we established with Egeus as “pride of possession” — Leontes feels Hermione and her child might be a threat to his power. This threat triggers his insecurity, his desire to control, and begins the downward spiral into cruelty. He gives his wife no laying in period, the traditionally respected amount of time given to women to recuperate after they give birth. Forcing his wife to come to court rather than rest and heal from her daughter’s birth in jail, Leontes risks his wife’s life. Greenblatt calls this “domestic tyranny of a hideous sort” (2887). His son, who quickly fell ill upon hearing of his father’s decree, dies soon after this. A short time passes before Paulina is back in Leontes’ court, this time with the news that his wife is now dead. It is only now that the king begins to see his possible error in hasty and harsh judgment.

Functioning as a facilitator for reunion between the long lost mother and her family, in the following years Paulina remains a counselor to the king. She works on softening his heart— bringing him to a place of fully acknowledging his wrongdoing, acting as a sort of conscious bringer, a revealer of transgression, for Leontes. After years of living with his decisions and their consequences, Perdita and her lover, the young prince of Bohemia, run away to Leontes’s kingdom in order to escape the King of Bohemia’s disapproval of their union. Upon arrival, however, their story is blown as the King of Bohemia and the shepherd who found Perdita as a lost child follow the young couple to Leontes’ court. The king, rejoicing that he might be able to finally right some of his wrongs, welcomes the young couple. He is overjoyed that his daughter is alive and back. King Polinexes is glad his son has fallen for a woman of noble blood, and it seems this union will fix the relationship that was destroyed between the two old kings by Leontes’s jealous rage. In the end, they all retreat to the country to see the statue of Hermione. In the fantastical conclusion is reminiscent of our discussion of
A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Hermione’s statue comes to life and embraces her family, allowing all the characters to live happily ever after. And this time, unlike A Midsummer Night’s Dream, the father gets his reconciliation.

Leontes got his happy ending because he was able to see the gravity of his wrongdoings and repent of them. According to Partee, “Only his long repentance and the miraculous recovery of his daughter will allow him some semblance of happiness.” (100). He was able to transform his hardened heart and give up his desire to have total control for something much more noble—love. Elise Denbo, in a review of Jennifer Vaught’s analysis of the emotional transformations Shakespeare’s men make, puts it this way: “Leontes’ shedding of tears enables his conversion from a jealous, aggressive monarch to a loving husband and father.” (1382). He gave up controlling those around him and was truly sorry for his harsh actions—spurred by a power-hungry rage. So when his daughter was returned to him, he was able to sincerely rejoice with his found daughter and “brought-to-life” wife. This reconciliation requires two people though, not just Leontes. This is only possible because of Perdita’s willingness to forgive and move towards her father, which is surprising given what he’s done to her, speaking volumes to her as a character and a woman.

Because of her father’s cruelty, Perdita’s life was troubled from the start. Born in a prison cell only to be soon after dismissed and banished to almost certain death by her father, Perdita grew up the adopted child of a shepherd. Years later, during the sheep shearing festival, Perdita is given the opportunity to present herself as being of a higher social status. In her own words, “poor lowly maid,/ Most goddess-like pranked up.” (The Winter’s Tale, 4.4, 9-10). Always humble about her position as hostess of the festival, her adopted father encourages her to “present yourself, /That which you are, mistress o’th’feast.” (4.4, 66-67) but
she admits her unworthiness even while in this position: “Or how/ Should I, in these my borrowed flaunts, behold/ The sternness of his [King Polinixes’s] presence?” (4.4, 23-24).

When her beloved starts to talk of disobeying his father and running away with her, she worries: “Sure this robe of mine/ Does change my disposition.” (4.4, 133-134). She recognizes the possible deceit in this act, immediately realizes she’s becoming someone she shouldn’t be, and worries she should take off the clothes granting her this freedom to run away with Florizel. And despite her lowly status as an adopted daughter of a shepherd, everyone sees her noble nature. Florizel, especially, sees in her a queen: “Each your doing,/ So singular in each particular, crowns what you are doing in the present deeds,/ That all your acts are queens.” (4.4, 145-146). Even the king of Bohemia admits her seeming noble blood: “This is the prettiest low-born lass that ever/ Ran on the greensward. Nothing she does or seems/ But smacks of something greater than herself/ Too noble for this place.” (4.4, 155-159). But Perdita, an extreme humble compared to her real father, admits, “Your praises are too large.” (4.4, 148) and states she will “queen it no inch farther” (4.4, 437-438). First a noble conception (no matter the actual father, both would be kings), then a lowly birth in jail and childhood as a humble shepherd’s daughter, then a pretend queen and hostess of a festival, then back to humble shepherd’s daughter, then exalted back to her noble position as princess, Perdita’s identity is constantly in flux. Unlike her father, the king, whose identity is steeply rooted in this innate and omnipresent entitlement, Perdita finds herself rooted in a tendency towards humility. While Perdita doesn’t get many lines in comparison to the other characters, the lines she does have, coupled with her righteous actions, prove her to be a gentle, honorable, respectable woman. Despite her father’s harsh actions towards her, her predisposition towards these traits will allow her to forgive him, later granting the reconciliation Leontes has been longing for.
This resolution isn’t something all the fathers get to experience, or at least for long if they do get it. King Lear will hold it for just a few moments (until his daughter dies, and then he dies). Prospero gets his way at least—his kingdom is back under his control and his relationship with his daughter is solid, though unhealthily selfish. Egeus, however, is left with nothing in the end— not even a brief mention to end his time on stage. To a large extent, I believe the degree of ‘happy’ endings has a lot to do with the father’s transformation in regards to their desire to control. Lear and Leontes experience the most change of heart— in turn they get their reconciliation with the child they banished. Prospero is willing to give up his magic books (in return for control over his old kingdom), and is able to keep his relationship with his daughter. Egeus, unfortunately, refuses to change. When presented with the opportunity to reconcile his relationship with his daughter—he instead calls for her punishment and her lover’s. His heart has only grown harder. Un-reconciled to anyone in the play, he is left outside the rejoicing and stripped of any power he may have had. Only when a father is able to change his heart is he able to get his rapprochement with this daughter and/or those around him.

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For further unpacking our understanding of the patriarchal father and his daughter, King Lear might be the most pertinent of all Shakespeare’s plays. John Bromley argues that: “They are of an age, the king and the Earl of Gloucester— careless, crude, grown old and blind in their place and power; they, taken apart or taken together, are Shakespeare’s comment upon public men.” (119). Shakespeare is, whether or not he intends, saying something about fathers and daughters. How Shakespeare portrays these men and their relationships with their daughter’s changes as the majority of these men’s eyes are opened to their blindness, to
their destructive power-hungry ways. The transformation that is necessary for a healthy parent-child relationship prevails within King Lear.

King Lear requires proof that his daughters love him, due to what I imagine to be an insecurity in knowing whether or not they really do love him. Desiring to extract praise from his daughters as a means of determining that love for him—he means to divide up his kingdom with regard to who loves him most. In order to prove evidence of their love, he means to have them commit to doing whatever he wants, for Cordelia this means marrying whomever he wants her to. As Hamilton states, dangling “power and property before her as the reward for saying what he wants to hear”, Lear forces them to publicly profess their love for him (111): “Which of you shall we say doth love us most? / That we our largest bounty may extend/ Where nature doth with merit challenge.” (King Lear, 1.1, 49-51). A man clearly wanting recognition from those around him, he expects all of his daughters to respond in a certain way. Greenblatt tells us, “He stages the love test, anticipating that in competing with her sisters, Cordelia will declare that she loves her father best, at which point Lear will demand that she prove her love by marrying the suitor of his choice.” (2328). The older two daughters claim they don’t have words to put their love to, yet they continue to explain their love for their father. Obviously toadying in order to get what they want, they will say whatever the king wants in order to get their share of the kingdom. Lear buys it, and asks the third daughter to convince him of her love, warning her “Nothing will come of nothing, speak again” (1.1, 89) and asking her to “mend [her] speech a little” (1.1, 93). Instead tells him: “Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave/ My heart into my mouth, I love your majesty/ According to my bond; nor more nor less.” (1.1, 90-92). Lear takes this the wrong way and sees it as an insubordination. According to Lisa Jardine, traditionally, women were supposed to be silent (109-110). So in this twist of events, when the woman is silent, she receives judgment. An
inverse of women’s norms occurs not just with Cordelia, but also with her two sisters as I will explore later.

Lear’s desire for praise and control lead him into believing lies, and subsequently into betrayal and ensuing madness. Hamilton argues that Lear’s motives for giving up his kingdom are not as altruistic as he says they are: “He does not, in other words, mean to bestow this gift and retire, but to remain on the scene to bask in his former glory” (111). He renounces his title to his two older daughters and taking his controlling nature a step further, he bans from the kingdom his youngest, Cordelia. She confronts her sisters, seeing them for what they really are (manipulative and cruel), and then retreats to France with her suitor. But even while she is gone from the stage she is never far from the plot. In the following acts, Regan and Goneril carry out their plan to steal all of their father’s power. Apparently, the power hungry trait runs in the family. And these two sisters got it, bad. As Lear slowly comes to the realization that Regan and Goneril have robbed him blind of all resources and rule, and that he has completely misjudged Cordelia’s faithful love towards him, he starts to go mad. He would never be the same. None of them would.

Cordelia is painted as the sweet, innocent daughter who would do anything for her father. She is faithful, honest, strong, and I think she truly loves Lear. And she must be all these things in order for their reconciliation to work. Without her forgiving nature, Lear wouldn’t be able to resolve their conflict. Their relationship seems to be good underlying— he ‘loved her most’ (1.1, 123). He tries to get her to speak up and prove her love so that he may give her a part of his kingdom: “How, how, Cordelia! Mend your speech a little, / Lest it may mar your fortunes.” (1.1, 92-93). He expects her of all the daughters to praise him the most, so when she doesn’t he is deeply hurt, confused, and angry. If he can’t get her to prove her love with marrying whom he wants, how will he be able to manipulate her into marrying the suitor of
his choice? Though he is king, and from what we can tell from his controlling and praise—hungry actions at the beginning of the play, a tyrant, Cordelia’s love for him doesn’t seem to be forced. Her words towards him are not sarcastic, and she recognizes the difference between true love and her sister’s false words after they claim their love for the king: “I know you what you are” (1.1, 270). In voicing this Cordelia foreshadows their future uncovering of lies, much like Hermione foreshadows the unveiling of truth to Leontes in The Winter’s Tale. It seems the women who are banished put their faith in truth—and it’s prevailing power to reveal itself despite the web of lies it may be tangled in.

Quickly after Lear realizes Cordelia was the only daughter who did love him—and that his other two daughters have been plotting against him—he is immediately convicted and dives himself into the deepest pits of shame. For him, this is a necessary step in his transformation. Once Cordelia comes back to their kingdom and goes to Lear, our understanding of Lear’s madness deepens. He does not recognize Cordelia at first, but once he finally does he begins to imagine what a life with Cordelia, away from all the drama, would look like, “We two alone will sing like birds i’ the cage” (King Lear, 5.3, 9). His dream of having a peaceful and quiet life with Cordelia, intertwined with their impending prison sentence, unveils a further step of his transformation. Rather than fantasizing about ruling a kingdom and having his power back, he seems content to be a bird in a cage with his faithful daughter. This shift from tyrant father of three, to rebelled against and powerless mad man, to a grieving, daughterless king once more further charts the larger transformation Lear goes through throughout the play.

Positioning her adjacent to her sisters, Cordelia is the prime example of the perfect daughter and woman. She is faithful, truthful, and loyal. She never slanders against her father (despite his banishment of her), and she forgives her father for doing such a thing once he
undergoes his transformation of heart in realizing his wrongdoings: “O my dear father! Restoration hang/ Thy medicine on my lips; and let this kiss/ Repair those violent harms that my two sisters/ Have in thy reverence made!” (4.7, 26-29). Cordelia’s ability to ‘hang restoration’ with her father points to her noble nature. She spots evil and calls it by name with her sisters, while still being able to forgive wrongdoings made in a episode of selfish praise-thirsty harshness. Both daughters in The Winter’s Tale and King Lear must be willing to move towards their fathers— but it is crucial those fathers undergo a transformation in how they view controlling others.

One imperative step in Lear’s transformation is his continual recognition of wrongdoings. At one point Lear brings heaven’s curses down upon him, the model of conviction. He knows his pride, selfishness, and desire for praise and control have lost him everything, and he has been faced with his offenses. It is at this point that we see him curse himself, stating he is hell-bound: “but I am bound/ Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears/ Do scald like molten lead.” (4.7, 46-48). Bromley suggests that: “Lear is careless of defeat, for he no longer cares for the world; his rage and ferocity are replaced by a love no longer perverted and still rightly placed; he has lost a kingdom and regained himself” (121). Coming a bit further out of his madness, he admits that he has done Cordelia wrong: “for your sisters/ Have, as I do remember, done me wrong. / You have some cause, they have not.” (4.7, 74-76). Cordelia, heart aching to see her father’s own heart hurt so, gently forgives him: “No cause, no, cause.” (4.7, 77). According to Bromely: “this— the gaining of self-knowledge by the self-disposed king— is the dramatic process of King Lear. His self-knowledge is won among hardships unimaginable, and is forged in the crucible of madness.” (118). Lear must admit defeat, must revel in the conviction of his actions, before he is able to experience the affects of the reconciliation brought on by his transformation and Cordelia’s willingness to forgive him.
Determining where Lear puts his faith throughout all of this is trickier; he is trusting in himself and in his ability to control his daughters, but he also seems to be putting his trust in his daughters to respect his power over them. This is ultimately where he goes wrong—Goneril and Regan never had an intention of respecting him or his power. Their nature too closely mirrors that of the men we’ve looked at; they are unable to create the woman’s necessary half of the reconciliation. Lear will never get his reconciliation without it.

There is never a point on stage in which either Goneril or Regan are repentant of their actions. Lacking the forgiving nature Cordelia and Perdita embody, their harshness towards their father shows they are unable to provide their half of reconciliation even if Lear did want to restore his relationship with them. They never move towards their father or sister. Hamilton suggests the proof of their barbarianism lies in fact that they turn on each other once Lear has been defeated and is “no longer their target” (119). These daughters seem to take on more and more masculine traits— as they get more violent and reveal in the dark nature of their actions. As they defy the traditional Renaissance ideals of what it means to be a woman (gentle, kind, quiet, submissive), they become more and more power hungry. There is something to be said with this transition into darkness— the more power over men they try to gain, the more violent they get, and the more violent they get, the more power hungry they become. This cycle of violence and power and masculinity will lead them towards a dismal future: murder, and suicide. But their ending isn’t the only violent end met before the play’s conclusion.

In the end, Lear is overwhelmed with the unexpected deaths of his daughters and many of those who were close to him. Cordelia, ever the faithful daughter, dies off stage as she is hung via Edmund’s order. Goneril and Regan’s murder-suicide are so incredibly opposite from what Lear’s expectations were for them that he is in shock. Upon a final bout of madness in
which he believes Cordelia may still be alive, he collapses and the play ends with many of the characters, good and evil, being carried off stage in a funeral march. Lear’s hurt is tangible: “A plague upon you, murderers, traitors, all! / I might have saved her; now she’s gone for ever!” (5.3, 268-269), “Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life, / And thou no breath at all?” (5.3, 305-306). His heart at last breaks, he takes his last breath, as he holds his last dead daughter’s body in his arms. A father transformed, his old heart cannot stand the wrong he has done, the hurt he has caused, and the loss of his finally reconciled-back daughter. The only solace the audience is left with is the resolution between Lear and Cordelia before the ending of both their lives and the play. Though they died, they were able to experience restored harmony and mutual love for one another before they died. By the end of the play, I think that’s all Lear really wanted. And it’s because that’s what he really wanted that was he able to finally get it. A willingness to recognize and admit wrong-doing, coupled with a willing to forgive daughter, is necessary for the reconciliation within King Lear or any of the other plays we’ve looked at.

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 Shakespeare’s powerful men must give up something to restore relational order with their daughters. The daughters, too, must be willing to provide something: a second chance. Without a man willing to admit wrong, and a daughter willing to forgive, a reconciled relationship is impossible. For men unwilling to loosen their tight grip on control, de-masculinization and the deconstruction of relational connections is inevitable. Egeus leaves the play with nothing, no shred of happiness in his hands. Prospero gets what he gives— a fair amount of hope for the future in return for his willingness to give up his magical powers as long as he gets his dukedom. Leontes finally shakes the chains of remorse and regret and is able to restore his conscience through Perdita’s mutual desire for harmony. And Lear, the one who dove deepest into the depths of shame, also achieves the deepest of love with his
daughter. The degree to which these men get their happiness, their resolution, can be attributed to their willingness to let go of control and move towards their daughter, wherever her forgiveness may lie.
Works Cited


