



Relatives of Major Characters in Shakespearean Plays: A Recherche Research

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Abstract

Relatives of major characters in Shakespeare's plays reveals the inner traits of the major characters of his plays in various aspects. Sometimes these relatives throw bright light to illuminate some revealing inner traits of some major characters. Sometimes their roles are just choric, commenting upon the whereabouts of other characters, episodes and situations. Sometimes they reveal the quotidian flux of human life with all their attitudes and platitudes. Sometimes their roles are tellingly functional in that they are used to put a major character into greater prominence through contrast. Here discussion has been made on some of these notable characters like Macduff, Lady Macduff, Little Macduff in *Macbeth*; Duke of Albany and Duke of Cornwall in *King Lear*; Egeus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Ferdinand in *The Tempest*.

Key words: Shakespeare, plays, character, major, minor.

Inclusion of the relatives of major characters in Shakespeare's plays have been done by Shakespeare to reveal the inner traits of the major characters in various aspects. Sometimes these relatives throw bright light to illuminate some revealing inner traits of some major characters. Sometimes their roles are just choric, commenting upon the whereabouts of other characters, episodes and situations. Sometimes they reveal the quotidian flux of human life with all their attitudes and platitudes. Sometimes their roles are tellingly functional in that they are used to put a major character into greater prominence through contrast.

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth* it is seen that Macduff is one of the Scottish noblemen who are devoted to King Duncan. He belongs to the group of characters who represent the principle of goodness in the play as against the evil of *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth*. He has not as large a part to play as *Macbeth* or *Banquo* at least in the earlier scenes. At the beginning he is not so conspicuous, but as the play progresses he becomes, at the end, a sort of a 'protagonist', leading as he does the resistance against *Macbeth* and being as it were the instrument of *Nemesis*. *Macduff* is the person who first appears in the play in

the so-called *Discovery Scene* (Act II, Scene iii) and discovers the murder of *Duncan*. At once he raises a hue and cry to announce the terrible news:

O horror! horror! horror!

Tongue nor heart cannot conceive, nor name thee! (*Macbeth*; II.iii.62-3)

He on discovering the murder of *Duncan* raises an alarm:

Awake! awake! ----

Ring the alarum-bell. – Murder, and treason!
Banquo, and *Donalbain!* *Malcolm*,
awake! (*Macbeth*; II.iii.72-4)

He also informs *Banquo* about the sad news -

O *Banquo!* *Banquo!*

Our royal master's murder'd! (*Macbeth*; II.iii.83-4)
And *Malcolm* ----

Your royal father's murder'd. (*Macbeth*;
II.iii.97)

It is in his 'limited service' (*Macbeth*; II.iii.51) he does 'make so bold to call' (*Macbeth*; II.iii.50) when he finds that the king is not stirring.

After the murder of *Duncan*, *Macduff* comes into prominence. When he realizes that *Macbeth* has killed the chamberlains, it strikes him as rather unusual, if not suspicious; and he bluntly asks, 'Wherefore did you so?' (*Macbeth*; II.iii.105) This is, no doubt, a

pertinent question and could have been followed up as a clue to the murder of the king. Macduff's emotional nature shows itself in public life also and contrasts him to Banquo. Like Banquo he is loyal, but his loyalty is emotional. 'Rational' perhaps is not the word for Banquo's loyalty, the word for it probably is 'official' or 'conventional'. But to call Macduff's loyalty 'emotional' is to call it by its right name. And if it is 'emotional', it is heroic also. Macduff is not a time-server, but loyal to the memory of the murdered king, no matter what may happen to him. He is not afraid to provoke the hostility of Macbeth, and this he does by refusing his presence at the feast; Is it not heroic of him to decline Macbeth's invitation with an absolute 'Sir, not I,' (*Macbeth*; III.vi.40) and to take upon his head the wrath of the tyrant, the fiend of Scotland. Macduff's emotional nature marks him as much in his private life. Of all men in the tragedy he is a family man. And it is a tribute to the man who renounces the claims of family life in order to serve his country reeling under the usurper's tyranny and restore the throne to the son of the murdered Duncan. As a loving father and a devoted husband, Macduff inspires love and affection in his wife and children.

On the other hand his flight from Scotland abroad with the hope of obtaining foreign aid for his country's deliverance is heroic too. Heroic again is his self-sacrifice, his putting his country before his home and leaving his castle to the tender mercy of the wolf. Macduff indeed is the patriot of patriots. He lived to see his country free from Macbeth's barbarous rule and his struggle for the liberation of his country is not an inconsiderable one. Macduff, ordinarily, is a man of few words. When in the last Act, the other leaders discuss the prospects of the battle against Macbeth, he of all men keeps mum. And this brings out another trait of his character: his reticence, when reticence is called for. This reticence comes of his self-control. A capacity for restraint is his most salient characteristic, which is evident in the way he receives the news of his domestic tragedy.

Shakespeare portrays Lady Macduff and her son to show his command of minor characters. Lady Macduff is a simple but devoted wife and mother with never a thought beyond her home which is kingdom large enough for her. She is domestically minded but heroic. She becomes indignant

when the security of her home and the safety of his family is in jeopardy for Macduff's thoughtless act *i.e.* his patriotism. She feels wounded by her husband's cruel neglect but this noble minded woman fails to understand her husband's motive in fleeing from the country and accuses her husband of having acted in an irresponsible manner. Her distress is revealed when she describes her son to Rosse:

Father'd he is, and yet he's fatherless.

(*Macbeth*; IV.ii.27)

But her wrath itself is love's invariable counterpart. The proud wife hides her tears under a veil of anger. The way she reproaches her husband is proof of her devotion to him. The great noble spirited wife is brave enough to give a challenging answer to the query of the murderers.:

I hope, in no place so unsanctified,

Where such as thou may'st find him. (*Macbeth*;

IV.ii.80-8)

Little Macduff, another minor character who has a personality of his own is a great creation of Shakespeare. He is affectionate, frank, brave, high spirited and witty. He is confident with his own power. His mother cannot simply cope with his nimble wit. The best in him comes when he encounters the murderers. His mother screams in horror at the very sight of the faces of the murderers but he is not scared. He protests when they call his father 'traitor'. He utters, in his innocent prattling, the new truth of contemporary life. Told by his mother that his father is a traitor, that a traitor is one who swears and lies, that all traitors should be hanged by honest men, the boy's reply serves as commentary on the bankruptcy of the time:

Then the liars and swearers are fools; for there are liars and swearers enough to beat the honest men and hang up them. (*Macbeth*; IV.ii.55-7) When the brave son of Macduff is stabbed he has not a thought for himself. Instead he is concerned for his mother's safety.

He has kill'd me, mother:

Run away, I pray you! (*Macbeth*; IV.ii.86-7)

The young hero dies without a groan, with an unconcern worthy of a Socrates. Indeed the slaughter of the innocent wife and child is final testimony to the public horrors of Macbeth's lawless reign.

Duke of Albany and Duke of Cornwall are two sons-in law of King Lear. They are the husbands of King Lear's daughters –

Goneril and Reagon respectively. Shakespeare carefully individualizes the two. In the Opening Scene where both are present no difference is noticeable. Neither of them utters a word of protest when Cordelia is rejected most unjustly by Lear and share is distributed between Goneril and Reagon. In his own place Duke of Albany is a mild husband and is almost completely under the thumb of his malish wife. He has no guts to curb Goneril. When Goneril ill-treats her father and Lear rages all that he can say:

My Lord, I am guiltless, as I am ignorant

Of what hath moved you. (*King Lear*; I.iv.271-2)

He tries a little to expostulate with her and utters a warning. He is absent from the scene where Goneril and Reagon heckle their father and send him out in the storm. He pours abuses on Goneril (on her return to him) when he hears of Goneril and Reagon's savage treatment to their father. He does not strike her down only because a woman's shape protects her. He thanks heaven when he hears from messenger that Cornwall has been killed. He is not the inefficient, spineless nincompoop that he appears at first to be.

On the other hand Duke of Cornwall is a good foil to Duke of Albany. He is a fit husband to the wolfish Reagon. He stands silently by and enjoys the fun when Goneril and Reagon heckle Lear and send him out into the howling storm. When Lear, his father-in-law has rushed out into the storm how smugly does he say, "Let us withdraw, 'twill be a storm."*(King Lear; II.ii.285)* He out tops his own self in his behaviour with Gloucester. He suspects Gloucester and wants to punish him though he is a guest to Gloucester's place because his only offence is that he helped Lear to leave for Dover where he may be safe. He pulls out one of his eyes and urged by his wife when he is going to pull out another he is fatally wounded by one of his servants. The sight is too cruel to bear. Thus passes out the cruelest man of the play. He is responsible for perhaps the most repulsive horrid act on the Elizabethan-Jacobean stage --- "hoist with his own petard."*(Hamlet; III.iv.207)*

Egeus, Hermia's tyrannical father is a minor character in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* but he plays a key part in illustrating the love play's theme of law versus love, and reason versus

imagination. He is a courtier at Theseus's court. He is an angry, bad tempered man with a nasty attitude: always grumpy and rarely happy. This small and stout man with a double chin and a purple face looking like he is ready to explode stomps around as though he is angry but in fact he is in deep thought. He has a big nose which he likes to poke in other people's businesses but he is a very proper man.

Prince Ferdinand is a minor character in William Shakespeare's final play *The Tempest*. People from royal and noble families are usually arrogant, self-serving, and pompous. But though Prince Ferdinand, son of Alonso, King of Naples and the heir to the throne of Naples comes from a royal family is humble and kind. Being escaped from the tempest, a violent and windy storm instead of mourning the loss of his father, Ferdinand immediately falls in love with a young girl named Miranda, the daughter of the man who sought revenge on his father and wins the approval of her father to marry her. It is with the marriage between Ferdinand and Miranda that the strife between the King Alonso and *Prospero* ends. Ferdinand seems in some ways to be as pure and naive as Miranda. He falls in love with her upon first sight and happily submits to servitude in order to win her father's approval. He doesn't say or do much, besides mooning in love. Still, he does seem easy to love, earnest, and good above all else. He does have a sort of princely arrogance about him. He also vows to stay true to her father, *Prospero*, and not violate Miranda's chastity before their wedding night because he is a nice guy.

Ferdinand typifies young, gallant nobility. He is handsome and well bred. He is also accepting of his fate. When *Prospero* pretends to brand him as a spy and traitor as part of his master plan, Ferdinand does not challenge him or fight his enslavement. Instead, he accepts the drudgery of his work as a pleasure, for it allows him to see the beautiful Miranda. He is truly blessed with a royal nature, worthy of marrying *Prospero's* lovely daughter to whom he is completely devoted. He represents the new generation, the source of hope for the future. For this reason, *Prospero* seeks Ferdinand out as the perfect spouse for his daughter. It seems to be a match made in heaven. *Prospero* allows Ferdinand and Miranda to interact, and seeing their desire for one another he allows

them to marry. Ferdinand displays noble intentions, assuring Prospero that he will not untie Miranda's "virgin knot" until they are formally married.

Thus, there is no denial of the fact that these minor characters are organically and intrinsically integrated to the plot of the plays in which they occur. Far from being decorative and superfluous, they constitute the very matrix of the plays. In the ultimate analysis the characters are minor in terms of their social positions and status, or even in terms of their brief presence in the plays; but their roles are not at all 'minor' in the true sense of the term.

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