On the Frontiers of Psychiatry: Ophelia and the Jailer's Daughter

by David P. Gontar (November 2013)

ABSTRACT

This article examines common themes in a pair of Shakespeare's works, one famous (Hamlet), the other (The Two Noble Kinsmen) still largely unknown. As each features a female character who experiences a mental or emotional breakdown, they have attracted the attention of scholars and health care professionals concerned with what in the 16th and 17th centuries was called "madness." Beyond cognitive dysfunction, Ophelia and the Jailer's Daughter share other significant markers and characteristics, including imagination, youth, romantic interests, dominating fathers and absence of a female parent. Ophelia, it will be recalled, loves Prince Hamlet, and the "Jailer's Daughter" (she has no other name in the play) adores a Theban soldier named Palamon. As each of these relationships comes undone, the female partners are incapable of restoring their equanimity, descending instead into chaotic behavior and unintelligibility. Some writers have proposed that, despite their raving, both Ophelia and the Jailer's Daughter seek to somehow criticize or amend oppressive social institutions and customs which may have prompted or exacerbated their misery. To this counterintuitive reading objections are raised. Close inspection shows such psychic symptoms are not well explained as oblique messages about social and political problems, but rather represent efforts by traumatized women to shield themselves from facts too painful to be assimilated.

Familiarity with these plays is presumed. The Two Noble Kinsmen is derived from the The Knight's Tale in Chaucer, who reworked the story told by Giovanni Boccaccio in his Italian epic Teseida delle Nozze d'Emilia.

EXPOSITION

1. Ophelia

What makes Ophelia lose her bearings? It is surprising how little insight is displayed in

modern criticism on this point. The child of an overbearing court sycophant, she has fallen under the spell of Prince Hamlet, the supposed son of the late King. Though we are given no information, there is no hint of divorce; we must infer that Polonius is a widower. How has Ophelia been affected by this implied privation? Polonius stands resolutely opposed to her relationship with Hamlet, who is beginning to show signs of imbalance. He has stressed that her social station is far beneath Hamlet's – ("Lord Hamlet is a Prince out of thy star" – II, ii, 142) – as she is a commoner, while he is a noble, and a distraught one at that. Yet Hamlet has favored her – and the match could in theory succeed. In a dramatic confrontation, Hamlet seems to fall apart right before her eyes, and he speaks to her in a grossly abusive manner. (III, i, 93-164) Yet in the very next scene, at the presentation of *The Mousetrap*, he can flirt with her so flagrantly in front of the entire court audience that she must find herself utterly humiliated. (III, ii, 106-122) A bit later in the same scene, Hamlet proceeds to make a fool out of her father (III, ii, 364-370) and, shortly after that, dispatches him by stabbing through the arras where Polonius is hiding in Gertrude's chamber. No sooner has Hamlet disclosed to Claudius the location of her father's remains in the most demeaning of terms (IV, iii, 19-37) than Ophelia's disintegration commences. The next time we see her, she is wandering in a dither. (IV, v) After this, she drowns, joining her unmentioned mother in death, a possible suicide. (IV, vii, 135-156)

Shakespeare gives us more than enough to grasp the meaning and causes of her madness and untimely death. For what do we expect when one's daffy boyfriend kills one's remaining parent, the man who warned us to stay away from him? Isn't this enough to send a girl over the edge?

How does the absence of a mother fit this scenario? Would she not have offered solace, counsel and reassurance to Ophelia? Might not a genuine maternal embrace have acted as a buffer between slings and arrows of outrageous fortune and her child? Even more than most of us, Ophelia suffers a deficit of love and affection. At no time does anyone seem to embrace her and assure her that she is ok and that all will be well.

A father is not a substitute for a mother. Without the female spouse, the father-daughter relationship can assume an undesirable propinquity and intimacy, issuing in compulsive control by the isolated male parent. Love that should be directed to a wife gets deflected to the child, who is not in a position to deal with it. In the case of Polonius we find a meddling and overly directive father.

> And then I precepts gave her,

That she should lock herself from his resort,
Admit no messengers, receive no tokens . . . .
(II, ii, 143-145)

It is well known that fathers who seek to govern a daughter's choice of mate are often acting out proscribed consanguineous impulses. In place of possessing the daughter, a paternally chosen surrogate may suffice. Shakespeare alludes to this, *e.g.,* when in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Lysander upbraids Demetrius about the interference of Hermia's father Egeus, saying: "You have her father's love, Demetrius; Let me have Hermia's. Do you marry him." (I, i, 93-94) The point is clear: the personal involvement of Egeus is felt as hyperbolical and inappropriate, signifying a paternal figure too invested in his daughter's love life. As Egeus identifies with Demetrius he can approve a match for Hermia with him. But the implications are pathological. By removing the imago of Ophelia's mother from *Hamlet*, Shakespeare underscores such excessive paternal inclinations. She is situated in a zone of tyranny – and danger.

At the end of the play, when Hamlet leaps after Laertes into Ophelia's grave, he wildly shouts his feelings for her:

HAMLET

I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers
Could not, with all their quantity of love,
Make up my sum.
(V, i, 266-268)

But can this young genius be so obtuse as to fail to understand what's happened to her? Is it possible he's forgotten how shamefully he treated her, how he snarled and showed contempt? Doesn't he know he just ran through her father with a 'bare bodkin' and left the corpse slumped in gore in Elsinore? Does he consider that she is now parentless? After hacking down Polonius, does he ever reflect how it might affect this woman for whom he professes such tender regard? Evidently not. Wouldn't our hero want to approach her and beg forgiveness? Thus the original parapraxis of the overlooked and absent mother metastasizes into the forgetting of her daughter, the woman Hamlet fancies he loved more than could forty thousand brothers. Mother, father – and then Ophelia herself – slip away, as if all had never been, sucked down in the "weeping brook" of unconsciousness. (IV, vii, 147)

Act IV, scene 5 is revealing. Ophelia's madness is first confirmed by Gertrude. Horatio informs her that Ophelia is murmuring about her father. (IV, v, 4) Ophelia sings demented ditties about a dead man and desertion by a lover. Claudius enters and comments that in her

desultory utterances Ophelia is bewailing her father's death, (IV, v, 44) yet in his mindlessness asks Gertrude "How long hath she been thus?" (IV, v, 66) "O, this is the poison of deep grief!" he exclaims. "It springs all from her father's death." (IV, v, 74-75) With everyone aware that Ophelia is beside herself at the loss of her father at the hands of the young man whom Claudius calls "my son," no one can muster a syllable of sympathy for her. No one speaks to her of her trauma. This conspiracy of silence is as damaging as the injuries she has undergone. But the mouths of Gertrude and Claudius are sealed by guilt. Were they to say anything, too much of the truth would come tumbling out.

Here is Gertrude's revealing soliloquy as she awaits the appearance of Ophelia.

> GERTRUDE
>
> To my sick soul, as sin's true nature is,
> each toy seems prologue to some great amiss.
> So full of artless jealousy is guilt,
> It spills itself in fearing to be spilt.
> (IV, v. 17-20)

Fully half the riches of Shakespeare lie in nuggets like this.

Madness in his plays is often represented as the horrified soul's flight from realities too painful to be acknowledged. Putting aside arid, hair-splitting debates about whether Ophelia is "insane" or not (which mimic the equally vacuous arguments about Hamlet's own insanity), we can acknowledge that the freight of agonies weighing down on Ophelia is crushing. Can the man who loved her more than forty thousand brothers and wooed her with affection, gifts and poetry be the same chap who curses her to her face ("Get thee to a nunnery") and then butchers her father? The court is indeed a wilderness of tigers, and not a single individual comes forward to commiserate with her, perhaps the unkindest cut of all. It would be surprising under such circumstances if she did not become unmoored.

2. The Jailer's Daughter

It is now generally conceded that it is the picaresque subplot of the Jailer's Daughter that carries the action of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* forward. The love-hate relationship of Palamon and Arcite is a stiff tableau which requires the raw energy of subalterns to attain its adventitious and ironical end. In the main plot, two curiously effeminate Theban warriors (forerunners of the Sacred Band of Thebes) are captured in battle by Duke Theseus. Lodged in a cell in Athens they spy from their window the young and dazzling Amazon Emilia and are

inexplicably smitten by her, leading to armed struggle for her favors. Each has his own tutelary deity. The patron of the chaste Emilia is, of course, Diana (the principal deity of the Shakespearean pantheon). Arcite prays to Mars for victory, while Palamon is protected by Venus. In the final battle, personally choreographed by Theseus, Arcite defeats Palamon. But as each god has its prerogatives, the ultimate triumph is a compromise or mixed blessing. Thrown from his prancing steed, Arcite is wounded and dies. Thus Emilia, who had prayed to Diana to continue in her chaste band, is awarded to Palamon as his shaken bride. Venus prevails.

In the midst of these preposterous goings-on we meet the Jailer's Daughter, who tends the prisoners in their confinement. Like Ophelia, this nameless teenager has no mother, and, like Ophelia, she goes berserk. The proximate cause is her gratuitous desire for Palamon, whom she worships as god on earth – though he is barely distinguishable from his cousin-in-arms. And, like warriors bleeding in armed combat, modern critics have in argument over this child's amour spilled their precious ink, largely in vain.

In the iconography of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, two goddesses contend, Venus and Diana. Emilia represents Diana; the Daughter's passionate craving for Palamon recalls the boundless desire of Venus for Adonis as set forth at length by Shakespeare in his best-selling poem of 1593. And as Venus's ardor for the narcissistic lad is not gratified, neither is the Jailer's Daughter's love for Palamon returned. The difference is that mortal Adonis is beneath Venus (in every sense), while noble Palamon towers above the plebian Daughter.

In this narrative, we have the Jailer taking the part of the manipulative Polonius. He has arranged for yet another nameless character, the Wooer, to marry his daughter. In flight from destiny, the Jailer's Daughter latches on to the resplendent Palamon. Unfortunately, she is barred from her hope, not, as in the case of Ophelia, by her beloved's growing dementia, but by the fact that Palamon is wholly infatuated with another woman, the demigoddess Emilia. His commitment to winning her is the absolute which the passion of the Jailer's Daughter reprises. And the crux of the matter is that Palamon's ardor for that other woman is at no time acknowledged, discussed or considered by the Jailer's Daughter. As a submerged taboo, the realization that Palamon is entirely and forever unavailable cannot be digested. The rival woman, a necessary blank, recapitulates that other tabula rasa in her mind, her seemingly forgotten mother, whose absence places her squarely in the possession of her father, the appropriately denominated "Jailer."

As one scans the text, it is hard to see how the Daughter cannot perceive that Palamon is preoccupied with Emilia. As long as they are in their cell together, Arcite and Palamon are

feuding over her, threatening one another, and waiting for the opportunity to engage in armed combat for her, never once considering whether their claims over her would be welcomed. Does the Daughter not attend on them and learn what's going on?

Let us listen to the silly colloquy and subsequent falling out of these sententious soldiers, and then reflect on the significance of the Daughter's characterization of their plight.

ARCITE

Yet, cousin,
Even from the bottom of these miseries,
From all that fortune can inflict upon us,
I see two comforts rising — two mere blessings,
If the gods please, to hold here a brave patience
And the enjoying of our griefs together.
Whilst Palamon is with me, let me perish
If I think this our prison.

PALAMON

Certainly, 'tis a main goodness, cousin, that our fortunes
Were twined together. 'Tis most true, two souls
Put in two noble bodies, let 'em suffer
The gall of hazard, so they grow together,
Will never sink; they must not, say they could.
A willing man dies sleeping and all's done.

ARCITE

Shall we make worthy uses of this place
That all men hate so much?

PALAMON

How, gentle cousin?

ARCITE

Let's think this prison holy sanctuary,
To keep us from corruption of worse men.

We are young, and yet desire the ways of honour
That liberty and common conversation,
The poison of pure spirits, might, like women,
Woo us to wander from. What worthy blessing
Can be, but our imaginations
May make it ours? And here being thus together,
We are an endless mine to one another:
We are one another's wife, ever begetting
New births of love; we are father, friends, acquaintance;
We are in one another, families –
I am your heir, and you are mine; this place
Is our inheritance: no hard oppressor
Dare take this from us. Here, with a little patience,
We shall live long and loving. No surfeits seek us –
The hand of war hurts none here, nor the seas
Swallow their youth. Were we at liberty
A wife might part us lawfully, or business;
Quarrels consume us; envy of ill men
Crave our acquaintance. I might sicken, cousin,
Where you should never know it, and so perish
Without your noble hand to close mine eyes,
Or prayers to the gods. A thousand chances,
Were we from hence, would sever us.

PALAMON

You have made me –
I thank you, cousin Arcite – almost wanton
With my captivity. What a misery
It is to live abroad, and everywhere!
'Tis like a beast, methinks. I find the court here;
I am sure, a more content; and all those pleasures
That woo the wills of men to vanity
I see through now, and am sufficient
To tell the world 'tis but a gaudy shadow,
That old Time, as he passes by, takes with him.
(II, ii, 55-104)

PALAMON (contd.)

Is there record of any two that loved
Better than we two, Arcite?

ARCITE

Sure there cannot.

PALAMON

I do not think it possible our friendship
Should ever leave us.

ARCITE

Til our deaths it cannot.
(II, ii, 112-115)

And it is at the very apogee of this absurd and delusive rapture that Palamon – and then Arcite – notice Emilia strolling in the garden below with her maid.

Instantly these two male lovers who have just declared their eternal bond with one another are at each other's throats.

PALAMON

What think you of this beauty?

ARCITE

'Tis a rare one.

PALAMON

Is't but a rare one?

ARCITE

Yes, a matchless beauty.

PALAMON

Might not a man well lose himself and love her?

ARCITE

I cannot tell what you have done; I have,
Beshrew my eyes for’t. Now I feel my shackles.

PALAMON

You love her then?

ARCITE

Who would not?

PALAMON

And desire her?

ARCITE

Before my liberty.

PALAMON

I saw her first.

ARCITE

That’s nothing.

PALAMON

But it shall be.

ARCITE

I saw her too.

PALAMON

Yes, but you must not love her.

ARCITE

I will not, as you do, to worship her
As she is heavenly and a blessed goddess!
I love her as a woman, to enjoy her –
So both may love.

PALAMON

You shall not love at all.

ARCITE

Not love at all – who shall deny me?

PALAMON

I that first saw her, I that took possession
First with mine eye of all those beauties
In her revealed to all mankind. If thou lov'st her,
Or entertain'st a hope to blast my wishes,
Thou art a traitor, Arcite, and a fellow
False as thy title to her. Friendship, blood,
And all the ties between us I disclaim,
If thou once think upon her.

ARCITE

Yes, I love her –
And if the lives of all my name lay on it,
I must do so. I love her with all my soul –
If that will lose ye, farewell, Palamon!
(II, ii, 153-180)

Now it is precisely this situation which confronts the Jailer's Daughter hour by tedious hour as she tends this pair in her housekeeping rounds. Of this she gives ample testimony.

JAILER'S DAUGHTER

These strewings are for their chamber.
'Tis a pity they are in prison, and 'twere a pity they should
be out. I do think they have the patience to make any

adversity ashamed; the prison itself is proud of ’em,
and they have all the world in their chamber.

JAILER

They are famed to be a pair of absolute men.

JAILER’S DAUGHTER

By my troth, I think fame but stammers
’em – they stand a grece above the reach of report.

JAILER

I have heard them reported in the battle to be the only doers.

JAILER’S DAUGHTER

Nay, most likely, for they are noble
sufferers. I marvel how they would have looked had
they been victors, that with such a constant nobility
enforce a freedom out of bondage, making misery their
mirth, and affliction a toy to jest at.

JAILER

Do they so?

JAILER’S DAUGHTER

It seems to me they have no more
sense of their captivity than I of ruling Athens. They
eat well, look merrily, discourse of many things, but
nothing of their own restraint and disasters. Yet
sometime a divided sigh – martyred as ’twere i’th’
deliverance – will break from one of them, when the
other presently gives it so sweet a rebuke that I could
wish myself a sigh to be so chid, or at least a sigher
to be comforted.
(I, iv, 21-45)

In other words, the Jailer's Daughter is well acquainted with these fellows. The very ambience of their relationship, the surreal strategy they concoct, are as familiar to her as her own garter. What is that "divided sigh" that breaks forth from these jealous souls if not the emblem of their enmity? And yet, she seems entirely unaware that both these dreamers are completely captivated by Emilia. Is that plausible? How could she know so much, yet so little about the man at the very center of her universe?

JAILER'S DAUGHTER

Why should I love this gentleman? 'Tis odds
He will never affect me. I am base,
My father the mean keeper of his prison,
And he a prince.
(II, iv, 1-4)

He has as much to please a woman in him –
If he please to bestow it so – as ever
These eyes yet looked on. Next, I pitied him,
And so would any young wench, o'my conscience,
That ever dreamed or vowed her maidenhead
To a young handsome man. Then I loved him,
Extremely loved him, infinitely loved him . . . .
(II, iii, iv, 9-15)

And so it is that this eros-obsessed young lady uses her access to the prison to help Palamon escape, only to find that, once freed, he shows no interest in her. Though she has told him to meet her behind a sedge, he fails to appear. For this she has not a glimmer of an explanation.

JAILER'S DAUGHTER

He has mistook the brake I meant, is gone
After his fancy. 'Tis now well nigh morning.
No matter – would it were perpetual night,
And darkness lord o'th' world. Hark, 'tis a wolf!
In me hath grief slain fear, and, but for one thing,
I care for nothing – and that's Palamon.
I reck not if the wolves would jaw me, so
He had this file. What if I hollered for him?

If he not answered, I should call a wolf
And do him but that service. I have heard
Strange howls this livelong night – why may't not be
They have made a prey of him? He has no weapons;
He cannot run; the jangling of his gyves
Might call fell things to listen, who have in them
A sense to know a man unarmed, and can
Smell where resistance is. I'll set it down
He's torn to pieces: they howled many together
And then they fed on him. So much for that.
Be bold to ring the bell. How stand I then?
All's chared when he is gone. No, no, I lie:
My father's to be hanged for his escape,
Myself to beg, if I prized life so much
As to deny my act – but that I would not,
Should I try death by dozens. I am moped –
Food took I none these two days,
Sipped some water. I have not closed mine eyes
Save when my lids scoured off their brine. Alas,
Dissolve, my life; let not my sense unsettle,
Lest I should drown or stab or hang myself.
O state of nature, fail together in me,
Since thy best props are warped. So which way now?
The best way is the next way to a grave,
Each errant step beside is torment. Lo,
The moon is down, the crickets chirp, the screech-owl
Calls in the dawn. All offices are done
Save what I fail in: but the point is this,
An end, and that is all.
(III, ii, 1-38)

This way madness lies, of course. But what set us on this track towards ultima Thule? Willful ignorance, apparently. What woman, intrigued by a man, fails to inquire about his marital or relational status? Is Palamon married? The Jailer's Daughter never wonders. Is he betrothed? Involved? A committed bachelor? Pining after someone else? Uninterested in the opposite sex? Questions unasked cannot be answered. Yet we must inquire: Why would a woman switch off her radar and sail into a cliff of indifference –or repugnance– unless there were something she

dimly suspected but didn’t want to confront? The Jailer’s Daughter has already revealed to us in her conversation with her father that when it comes to Palamon and Arcite she has an uncanny *Verstehen*