

'SHAKESPEARE'S DAUGHTERS' | By Nita Pettigrew

Shakespeare's Daughters (McFarland & Company, 2003) grows out of Sharon Hamilton's experience as a teacher, and the book speaks to any student, to any teacher of Shakespeare—as well as to any parent.

Hamilton, a former English instructor at the Academy who is now head of the English department at Buckingham Browne & Nichols School in Cambridge, tells us that it was a high school student's heartbreaking portrayal of Juliet that triggered her realization that Juliet's parents "do not love her as she needs to be loved." Her own students had just read *The Tempest*, and Hamilton was struck by the contrast between Juliet and Miranda: in Prospero, Miranda had a father who not only listened to her needs, but used all his powers to help her meet them. As she writes, "Miranda's father understands her perfectly and devotes his life to nurturing her, and Miranda flourishes."

Hamilton suspected that in Shakespeare's plays, the relationship between a young woman and her father determines the fate of the daughter. The resulting study proves Hamilton's suspicions correct and gives her readers an important new lens through which to view Shakespeare's plays. What's more, she adds new layers to our appreciation of Shakespeare's extraordinary understanding of human nature. "Parents and children ourselves," she writes, "we turn to Shakespeare's plays seeking what only great literature can provide: wisdom about the human heart and eloquent words to sustain us in dark moments and enhance our times of triumph. . . . Nowhere is he more astute than in his portrayal of fathers and daughters, and the factors that foster or undermine that bond."

In this admirably cohesive collection of essays, Hamilton examines the father-daughter relationships in 14 of Shakespeare's plays: not only *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Tempest*, but also *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Hamlet*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *King Lear*, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*. Marriage was the ritual, traditional bridge into adulthood for Elizabethan women. In Shakespeare it becomes a crucible, testing the relationship between father and daughter.

Hamilton convincingly challenges the assumption that the Elizabethan ideal was docile, obedient womanhood. We come away from this work with what feels like an insight into Shakespeare's personal values: not only what his ideal of womanhood was, but also his perspective on parenting. "In no case," Hamilton tells us, "does Shakespeare present the domineering father as the standard of justice and wisdom." When the father fails to listen or to heed the words of a daughter or wife, the ensuing events can be tragic.

Hamilton's study also provides a new perspective on the structure of Shakespeare's plays. It is traditional to focus critical attention on his male characters, but *Shakespeare's Daughters* casts light into the corners of his plays and brings the role of female characters more fully into view. Hamilton makes us aware of how often Shakespeare creates a parallel universe, a parallel conflict that enriches structure and theme.

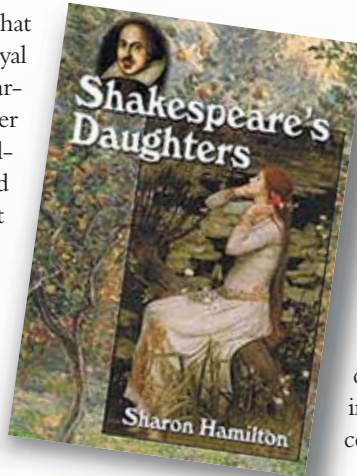
An excellent example is *Hamlet*: What would that play be without Ophelia and without Polonius' terrible failure to hear and support his daughter's will? Or consider *Othello*, whose tragic center is not the title character but Desdemona, whose father has failed utterly to consider her needs. Hamilton sees Desdemona as an abused wife and convincingly tracks her inability to stand up to her husband's abuse straight back to Brabantio's parenting.

Shakespeare's Daughters is an English teacher's dream: a welcome, highly accessible companion to the study of the comedies, tragedies and romances. Hamilton works from a solid understanding of the Elizabethan world view; she has a refined, well-practiced ear for the language. And there is something companionable in her pleasure as she explicates his puns and use of imagery. In her consideration of Jessica's flight from Shylock, for instance, Hamilton speculates on the chances of success in Jessica's marriage. It's a dark prognosis. Hamilton examines Shylock's heartbroken response to the news that Jessica has not only stolen his beloved wife's turquoise ring, but has traded it for a monkey. "The 'monkey,'" she writes, "for which [Jessica] so willingly trades Leah's turquoise was for the Elizabethans a symbol of sexual license." The detail raises questions about

Jessica's future marital happiness. Throughout her study, Hamilton includes references to screen and stage interpretations of the plays, thereby reminding us of the myriad possibilities in readings.

The book's structure invites the reader to "fish around," to search out those chapters that speak to our particular interests, but reading cover to cover, one appreciates the book's elegantly constructed coherence. In six chapters, Hamilton examines the thematic permutations of the father-daughter relationship. The first chapter, for instance, is titled "The Father as Inept or Able Mentor: *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Tempest*." Other chapters deal with daughters who rebel, who acquiesce, who play the good girl, who act in their fathers' stead, and finally daughters who forgive and heal. Cordelia is, of course, the premier example of a daughter who forgives and heals.

Shakespeare's Daughters reminds us that after all these centuries, we still go to see Shakespeare's plays because his characters "continue to inform us who we are." We have long recognized the complex power of his male characters. Hamilton's work gives us a window into the hearts and minds of the young women who also populate Shakespeare's plays. And what hearts and minds they have—every bit as complex and noble, dark and deceptive, witty and appealing as their male counterparts. In this study, Hamilton calls our attention most particularly to adolescents, who, she tells us, "have a reputation for being rebels, but in Shakespeare's day, as in our own, they are also individualists. The plays urge us to credit their strengths, to treat them as individuals . . . and, most important, to model for them the qualities that we want them to develop. The most attentive witnesses to our character are the young people in our care."



In many of Shakespeare's plays, notes Sharon Hamilton, it is the relationship between a young woman and her father that determines the fate of the daughter.

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ALUMNI/AE

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Michael Golay. *The Tide of Empire: America's March to the Pacific.* (J. Wiley, 2003)

FORMER FACULTY

Sharon Hamilton. *Shakespeare's Daughters.* (McFarland & Company, Inc., 2003)

CORRECTION

In the fall 2003 issue of the *Bulletin*, we listed an incorrect title for a new book by Phillip D. Harvey '56. The correct title is *Government Creep: What the Government Is Doing That You Don't Know About*, and it was published by Loompanics Unlimited.

Shakespeare's Daughters is a generous contribution to literary scholarship, but it is more than that: It leaves readers looking into their own hearts, into their own upbringings, and into their own practices as teachers and as parents. ●

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