To Honor Or Not To Honor—That Is The Question

The bible says, “Honor your father and mother as the lord your God commanded you, so that you may live long and that it may go well with you…” (Deut. 5:16 NIV). It is interesting to note that this is the first of the Ten Commandments with a promise: a long and good life. In Shakespeare’s tragedies, Hamlet and King Lear, some of the adult children follow this rule in their actions toward their parents, while others do not. Nevertheless, what makes these plays profoundly tragic is that, regardless of parental honor shown—or lack thereof—all of the adult children (with the exception of one) die young. Thus, Shakespeare seems to challenge the validity of this biblical promise through the untimely fates of his youthful characters, whether they truly and completely honor their parents, partially do, or simply feign an appearance of it.

Completely honoring one’s parents includes two things: obedience and respect. In other words, it is not only doing what the parent instructs, but also esteeming that parent with the utmost value. This is very difficult to do. Even King Lear’s Cordelia, who is one of the most virtuous characters between the two plays, does not entirely live up to this standard. For example, at the beginning of the play, she is not obedient during her father’s “love profession game.” Instead, she contemplates holding her tongue: “What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent” (1.1.68). By remaining silent, refusing to flatter her father, Cordelia essentially rebels against his request. She does tell him that she loves him, but she refuses to pour on the flattery as her sisters do, which is what her dad was really asking of her.

Cordelia also stubbornly refuses to accept permanent banishment from Lear’s kingdom and from the family. In scene one, Lear tells France, “Let her be thine, for we / Have no such daughter, nor shall ever see/ That face of hers again” (1.1.304-306). After disowning her, Lear clearly states that he does not want to see Cordelia again. However, at the end, she seeks him out, forces him not only to see her, but also to have reconciliation. Although it is meant to help Lear, overall, Cordelia is still defying her father’s
orders. Nevertheless, she does show great respect in risking her own life to come to the king’s rescue. The scene in which Cordelia greets him with a kiss to “Repair those violent harms that my two sisters / Have in my reverence made” (4.7.32-34) is especially poignant. This generous display of affection reveals Cordelia’s great love and esteem for her father. Lear points out justifications for resentment that Cordelia might have; however, she responds with “no cause”—choosing, instead, to instantaneously forgive and forget his previous treatment of her.

On the other hand, Goneril and Regan’s behavior is the complete opposite. In the beginning, the two older girls shallowly obey their father in the flattery game, which is rewarded by his giving them each half the kingdom. This false obedience quickly ends, however. Children who honor their parents will provide for them in times of need, when the parents cannot take care of themselves, but when Lear reaches Goneril’s castle, she is anything but willing to provide for her father. She not only instructs the servants to be rude to him, she starts the process of whittling away the knights that Lear wants to keep. Since these knights represent his authority and importance, Goneril—and later Regan—essentially strip Lear of all his self-respect and importance.

Shakespeare complicates matters by creating in Lear a protagonist who does not entirely deserve his daughters’ respect. After all, another biblical concept is that of reaping and sowing. At this point, Lear is simply reaping from his oldest daughters what he has sown through his own actions. Goneril and Regan’s behavior actually mirrors that of their father’s. Both girls do enjoy being Queen over half of Britain and hunger for more power, but this is not surprising when we see their role model. Although, at the beginning of the play, Lear gives up his responsibilities as king, throughout, he still expects to have a position of power. Immediately after “shak[ing] all cares and business of the kingdom” (1.1.41), Lear ruthlessly banishes both Cordelia and Kent, which shows he is still commanding people. Later, out in the storm, he even tries to wield authority over the weather: “Blow winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!” (3.2.1).

Goneril and Regan’s heartless cruelty eerily echoes their fathers’ also. In fact, they push Lear out into the storm just as easily as Lear pushed Cordelia out, taking away her dowry. If they needed a teacher
in heartlessness, Lear has been the best! Certainly, he has a fierce temper, which is seen when Lear realizes Goneril’s ingratitude. Angrily, he calls on the gods to make her sterile. His name calling, ("marble-hearted fiend," more hideous than a "sea monster," and "dested kite" (1.4.270-274)), is further evidence of his temper. With Regan, Lear is incensed when she refuses to give him bed and food, (though he begs on bended knees), yet, he, himself, has modeled this behavior throughout the first act by rejecting Kent and Cordelia.

Like Goneril and Regan, Edmund displays public obedience toward his father in the beginning of the play. He appears to be respectful, even after Gloucester makes fun of him being a bastard. When Gloucester asks Edmund if he has met Kent, Edmund courteously responds, “No my Lord.” (1.1.26). After the introduction, Edmund politely offers his services to Kent’s lordship. Although Edmund has every reason to be rude toward his father, he remains silently obedient. Quickly, we see that under his facade, however, he is actually very resentful. Clearly, he wants revenge: “Edmund the base/ Shall top th’ legitimate. I grow, I prosper. / Now, gods, stand up for bastards!” (20-23). In this line, we see that Edmund is extremely offended by his label of “bastard,” and he will lie, connive, and later even betray his father in order to obtain the inheritance and respect that he desires. Edmund’s ultimate dishonor towards his father is the betrayal of showing Cornwall the letter proving Gloucester is “an intelligent party to the/ advantages of France” (3.6.13). Edward’s lack of remorse shows he has absolutely no honor toward his father. This betrayal leads to Gloucester’s torturous punishment, yet, Edmund moves forward in his schemes, completely unaffected.

Like Cordelia, Edgar is the only character in King Lear that comes close to completely honoring his father. Despite the harsh treatment he is given early in the play, Edgar (disguised as poor Tom), remarkably serves as caretaker for Gloucester. He obediently leads his father to Dover Cliff, even though Gloucester’s desire is for his own harm. Once there, Edgar does trick him, but it is with the intent to help his father overcome his suicidal thoughts. “Why do I trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it” (4.6.42-43).
Both Cordelia and Edgar are good children; but, unfortunately, in the end, Edgar is the only child left alive. While Cordelia is hanged, Edgar is given the honor of helping Albany rule the kingdom. Clearly, there is no formula which links behavior to reward. It is interesting to note that the closing words of *King Lear*, spoken by Edgar, hint at the idea that Shakespeare’s youths will not have longevity, despite the honor they have shown their parents. Edgar proclaims that the oldest (Lear) has carried the most weight of sorrow, and concludes: “we that are young / Shall never see so much nor live so long.”

(5.3.395).

In the play *Hamlet*, there is also a division between children who truly honor their parents and those who only partially do. Surprisingly Hamlet himself, is the one who most struggles with the idea of parental obedience and respect. Like Cordelia, Hamlet only truly honors his father half way. Hamlet does respect and value Old Hamlet immensely. In fact, he claims his father was like a god: “A combination and a form indeed / Where every god did seem to set his seal / To give the world assurance of a man” (3.4.70-72). However, over and over, we see Hamlet disobediently thinking—rather than acting—on his father’s request. Hamlet does not even deny this willful procrastination. When he sees his father’s ghost the second time, he asks the spirit if it has come to punish him: “Your tardy son to chide/ …[who] lets go by / Th’ important acting of your dread command?” (3.4.121-124). At this point, we are half way through the play, and Hamlet still has not done what he promised in the first act.

On the other hand, Hamlet resentfully obeys his mother in his actions, as seen when she requests that he not return to Wittenberg. “I shall in all my best obey you madam” (1.2.124). Yet, he has lost all respect for her. After her quick remarriage to the “lesser” Claudius, Gertrude seems to have fallen off her pedestal in her son’s eyes. While remembering how she once hung on his father with fierce longing and love, Hamlet becomes increasingly disgusted with his mother’s new choice for a husband. Ultimately, Hamlet concludes “frailty, thy name is woman!” (1.2.150). This misogynistic attitude begins to pervade his thoughts—causing him to later cruelly reject Ophelia.

Certainly, Hamlet’s relationship with his mother is a confusing one. In fact, we often see Hamlet’s resentment toward Gertrude’s incestuous marriage occupying his mind more than the murder of
his father. Hamlet seems particularly obsessed with his mother’s sexuality. For example, at the close of the scene in Gertrude’s room, Hamlet begs his mother “go not to my uncle’s bed” (3.4.180). Hamlet’s violent outburst is also very disrespectful, but Gertrude does not give him many reasons to show honor. Although she vows to keep his secret about his feigned madness, promising, “I have no life to breathe / What thou has said to me” (3.4.221), she immediately runs to Claudius and reports everything the minute Hamlet is gone. The audience is left with the feeling that it is no wonder Hamlet does not honor Gertrude. She does not seem to deserve it.

Compared to Hamlet, Ophelia and Laertes are just the opposite. With Polonius, they are both obedient and respectful. Ophelia, especially, does everything her father requests. For example, she asks Polonius what to do when Hamlet begins acting strangely, asserting her obedience: “as you did command / I did repel his letters and denied / His access to me.” (2.2.122). In the scene where Polonius wants to spy on Hamlet, father instructs daughter—as if she is a puppet—to do exactly as he says: “walk you here…read on this / book” (3.1.1-48-50). Again, Ophelia completely follows his orders.

Laertes also shows obedience and reverence towards Polonius. Early in the play, Laertes willingly listens to his father’s long lecture on social behavior, etc. Then, upon leaving for France, Laertes respectfully bids: “Most humbly do I take my leave, my lord” (1.3.88). His esteem of his father is also evident later through his willingness to immediately avenge Polonius’s murder. “I’ll be revenged / Most thoroughly for my father” (4.5.154), which Claudius labels as being both a “good child” and a “true gentleman” (4.5.170-171). Laertes’ only downfall is that he resorts to deceitfully cheating in the duel. Just as Lear’s daughters mirrored his behaviors, Laertes also copies some of Polonius’s negative behaviors. The old man has been sneaky and deceptive several times in the play by hiding and eavesdropping on conversations. This spying ends up getting him killed. In the same way, Laertes uses deception in the duel, but the poisoned rapier ends up hurting himself.

This brings us back to the point of death. Both Laertes and Ophelia show honor to their father, yet both die. Although Hamlet shows some respect and obedience, his life is also cut short. Throughout both plays, Shakespeare clearly does not connect fates of his characters to the quality of their behavior. In King
Lear, Cordelia shows considerable honor toward her father, while Regan, Goneril, and Edmund have not. Yet, they all share the same unhappy fate. For all of these children, there is no promise “that you may live long and that it may go well with you.” No matter how much honor these children show their parents, there is only loss, sadness and pain.