

**HIGHLIGHTING THE PROBLEM WITH PRIMOGENITURE USING
THE THEME OF SIBLING RIVALRY IN *AS YOU LIKE IT***

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Abstract

Sibling rivalry being a common theme, a number of Shakespeare's plays display incidences of sibling rivalry. The reason why I chose this text is because it has ample examples of rivalry and evidently highlights the problems with primogeniture which happens to be my prime argument.

I chose to work with the problems of primogeniture because I personally consider it an unfair system of inheritance, justified simply on being born first. While doing research, I also read articles which talked about the religious sanction provided for implementation of primogeniture. For e.g., Jesus was literally the first born of God and Virgin Mary and the term 'first born' expresses God's dear affection for an individual.

By highlighting the ill effects of primogeniture and not glorifying it in my paper, I aim to form a different, radical opinion about the system before it is blindly supported by anyone.

Keywords: Sibling rivalry, Shakespeare, Primogeniture, Patrimony, ill effects

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“Sibling rivalry is a type of competition or animosity among children, blood-related or not. The sibling bond is often complicated and is influenced by factors such as parental treatment, birth order, personality, and people and experiences outside the family. According to child psychology sibling rivalry is particularly intense when children are very close in age and of the same gender, or where one child is intellectually gifted. In history and literature, there have been great sibling rivalries” (New World Encyclopedia).

Shakespeare had seven siblings, only four of which survived into adulthood. Edmund, the youngest sibling, at age sixteen left Stratford and join his brothers William and Gilbert in London. “The Shakespeare brothers differed from the de Boys in that there were four instead of only three. However, it is interesting to note that in terms of education, Gilbert and William, like Oliver and Jaques, were educated, while Richard and Edmund, like Orlando, were not” (Kemper).

As You Like It is structured around two pairs of siblings and one pair of cousins—Orlando and Oliver, Duke Senior and Duke Frederick, Celia and Rosalind. “Each pair has a

different dynamic, defined by varying degrees of familial love and desire for power. Whereas the relationships between Oliver and Orlando and between the two dukes are characterized by competition, envy, and power mongering, Celia and Rosalind maintain a relationship characterized by love and inseparability” (Kemper 5).

The opening scene of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* reveals to us the sibling rivalry between Oliver the eldest son and Orlando the younger son of the nobleman the late Sir Rowland de Boys who has died prior to the beginning of the play and has left instructions in his will divvying up his estate. While the vast majority has been placed in the hands of Oliver, Sir Rowland gives clear-cut direction to use his wealth to care for Orlando and Jaques accordingly. Orlando is fuming with anger at the injustice meted out to him by his eldest brother Oliver. Oliver is the eldest son and so has inherited his father's title and all of his vast estate and his wealth, but he has forgotten his duties towards Orlando and Jaques, the middle brother, is “kept at school” while Orlando is made to be little more than a servant. After some time living in this “servitude”, Orlando decides he “will no longer endure it” and rebels against his “bloody brother”, going as far as to grab his neck in anger (I.I).

The unnaturalness of the situation is made clear in Orlando's speech. He has been kept from his modest patrimony, his gentle birth has been undermined. Oliver's brutal treatment of the faithful servant Adam, whom he addresses as an "old dog," shows that the disorder affects other members of the household as well (I.I). In the same scene we learn of an earlier, parallel perversion of normal family life, but here the roles are reversed, with the young men's father, a younger brother abusing his older brother. Fearing Orlando's new-found courage, Oliver decides

to “physic (his) rankness” and employs the assistance of Duke Frederick’s chief wrestler, Charles. Charles is set to wrestle Orlando in the Duke’s court later that afternoon, so Oliver warns Charles of Orlando’s treachery:

I'll tell thee, Charles: it is the stubbornest young fellow of France,

full of ambition, an envious emulator of every man's good parts,

a secret and villainous contriver against me his natural brother:

therefore use thy discretion;

I had as lief thou didst break his neck as his finger. (I.I)

*Strange as it may seem, there is no explicit evidence at all in the play for Oliver's hatred towards Orlando his younger brother. Whatever reason we can think of - jealousy because he was liked and favored by the ordinary people, because he resembles his father more than Oliver - will only be a conjecture. **Oliver hates Orlando because Orlando had inherited his father's characteristics, this made Oliver jealous of him as ,the people of his own kingdom were sympathetic towards Orlando and completely ignored the good qualities in him(I.I).** Upon Charles’ exit, Oliver’s ten-line soliloquy gives the reason for his deviousness; here, to paraphrase John Middleton Murry, is Shakespeare the playwright at work, not endowing his villain with psychological realism, but giving him a plausible motive for his action (Murry). Oliver reveals that this feasibility scares him:*

Yet he’s gentle; never school’d, and yet learned, full of noble device;

of all sorts enchantingly beloved; and; indeed, so much in the heart of the

world, and especially of my own people who best know him, that I am

altogether misprized. (I.I)

Back to the idea of the brother's keeper, is interesting to note that when Sir Rowland died, primogeniture dictated Oliver's inheritance of the wealth and estate, but also transitioned him unto the father figure in the family, catapulting him from peer to master, perhaps unwittingly. Fortune gave Oliver this responsibility; clearly Oliver was not ready for it. Louis Montrose in his essay "Social Process and Comic Form" cites this as another problem with primogeniture: "Primogeniture... simultaneously... conflates the generations in the person of the elder brother and blocks the generational passage of the younger brother" (91). In Act II, Adam says this of Oliver: "Your brother, no, no brother, yet the son- Yet not the son, I will not call him son" (II.II). "Though in context, Adam uses this as a denouncement of Oliver's character, it also illustrates the point that Oliver's identity within the familial structure is now blurred. He is a brother and a son, and yet no longer a brother and a son, he is now forced to be a father. If he is not ready to assume this duty, his reluctance could turn into resentment, which of course would bleed into his brother. Therefore resentment becomes an important motive behind Oliver, as it is twice-fostered: once, towards Orlando's qualities, and again, at having become Orlando's "keeper." This reluctance can be seen in Oliver's decision to give it back to Orlando when he asks for Orlando's consent to marry Celia. He reverses his duty and restores them to a place of equality" (Kemper 20).

Another example of sibling rivalry running parallel is between Duke Senior and Duke Fredrick. Duke Frederick has usurped his older brother, Duke Senior, forcing him into exile. He has allowed Duke Senior's daughter, Rosalind, to remain at court because she is the cousin and best friend of Celia, Fredericks's only daughter. Celia will do anything for Rosalind, and assures her that though her father is banished, Rosalind will always be taken care of, through Celia:

You know my father hath no child but I,

nor none is like to have: and, truly, when he dies,

thou shalt be his heir, for what he hath taken away from thy father perforce,

I will render thee again in affection; by mine honour, I will;

and when I break that oath, let me turn monster. (I.II)

After the match with Charles, when Frederick enters hastily and for no other reason than "that people praise her for her virtues and pity her for her father's misfortune" banishes Rosalind in the fashion of her father, it manifests the jealousy with he had for his brother and through this act he brings the frustration out on Rosalind(I.II).

Primogeniture is described by Encyclopedia Britannica as "preference in inheritance that is given by law, custom, or usage to the eldest son... The motivation for such a practice has usually been to keep the estate of the deceased, or some part of it, whole and intact" (Primogeniture 1). Primogeniture seemed to have arisen around the 13th century, and continued until the late 17th

century. Its main purpose was to keep large estates undivided, as would happen if numerous heirs were allowed to take control of a piece of property (Cooley 1). It is a generally accepted fact, in the case of England, however, that the introduction of primogeniture was not only contemporaneous with the Norman invasion, but somewhat organically linked to the feudal organization set up in its wake. “Though utilized throughout Europe, it was particularly popular in England, perhaps because of the English obsession with a class system. It is very possible that *As You Like It*, at least Orlando and Oliver and Frederick and Senior’s subplots, is a commentary on primogeniture. It was a problem between siblings in Elizabethan England. The prime factor affecting all families which owned property was primogeniture. (It) went far to determine the behaviour and character of both parents and children, and to govern the relationship between siblings” (Montrose 84).

It was not the practice itself that hurt fraternal relationships, but the abuse of it (84). Indeed, Sir Rowland is innocent in bequeathing his estate to Oliver, whom in turn misuses the power and perverts the trust. Even Jacques gets behind the cause in Act II, “(railing) against all the first born of Egypt” (II.V). But Orlando makes the most stunning case in his simple imploration to Oliver: “I know you are my eldest brother; and, in the gentle condition of blood, you should so know me. The courtesy of nations allows you my better, in that you are the first-born; but the same tradition takes not away my blood, were there twenty brothers betwixt us: I have as much of my father in me as you; albeit, I confess, your coming before me is nearer to his reverence” (I.I). Kemper in his paper argues that although Oliver is ultimately redeemed through love and awakened through forgiveness, what if Oliver had succeeded in having Orlando killed? Where

would that have put him? Would he have stopped at Orlando, or would the newly-educated, and therefore potentially dangerous, middle brother Jaques be next? (46)

Perhaps the hostility between the brothers Frederick and Senior provides another argument against primogeniture, but not in the same vein as the de Boys' boys. As the younger, Frederick does not allow himself the misfortune custom has dealt him, and therefore claims his own fate, violently usurping his kind brother and banishing him from the court. This might be a warning as to what the inheritance practice could drive the younger brothers to do in revolution. The main argument against primogeniture is that it often left the younger sons to fend for themselves with little or no training or skill. "The contrast was too sharp between the life of an elder son, whose fortune was made for him by his father, and who has nothing to do but maintain and perhaps augment it, and that of the younger sons who faced a life of hard and continuous effort, starting from almost nothing" (Montrose 86).

By the end of the play, however, love and mutual understanding become defining features of all of these close family ties, even for the spiteful male siblings: Orlando looks past Oliver's prior evil and saves his brother from a potentially fatal attack; returning his brother's generosity, Oliver revokes his previous intent to kill Orlando and treats him as a true brother. Oliver and Orlando are then further united by their simultaneous marriage to the inseparable cousins, Rosalind and Celia. Even the malignant relationship between the dukes is resolved, as Duke Frederick, en route to fight his brother, encounters a religious man and is suddenly inspired to devote his life to a monastic existence. To fulfill his purpose and undo his past evil, he restores

power to Duke Senior. “The conflict and inversion of fraternal conflict links generations, the relationships of brother and brother can be linked to the generation of father and son. In the process of atonement, the two families and the two generations of men are doubly and symmetrically bound: the younger brother weds the daughter of the elder brother and the elder brother weds the daughter of the younger brother. They create the figure of chiasmus.

Whatever vicarious benefits *As You Like It* brings to younger brothers and to youth, it is not achieved by perverting or destroying the bonds between siblings and generations, but by transforming and renewing them- through marriage” (Montrose 48). In all of these relationships, conflict arises out of competition, jealousy, and a desire for unchallenged power. Although these forces are shown in the text to be ultimately less powerful than the force of love for family and primogeniture was thought to be necessary for ensuring the continuity of the patrilineal family on which rested the whole English political system throughout those centuries, it had detrimental consequences for intra-family relations and for traditional family values. “A custom which allowed the elder son to inherit the whole family estate, to the exclusion of the other children, did affect brother-brother and father-son relations. It disturbed emotional and authority relationships within the family. Enmity between brothers, rivalry between father and elder son, family injustice and disharmony and the sad fate of younger sons and daughters, were among the adverse effects blamed on primogeniture” (Jamoussi 16).

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