Hamlet and Cinderella - reading tragedy as family drama

Marcella McCarthy analyses Hamlet in the light of the theory that fairy-tales encapsulate universal narrative archetypes.

In his seminal book Symbolic Stories, David Brewer introduced the idea that certain archetypal fairy and folk-tales contained within them the seeds of different types of family drama. Looking initially at medieval romances, he suggested that the apparent simplicity of the narratives of these stories contained within them a profound understanding of the nature of the adolescent struggle as young people strive to escape from their birth families and leave home in order to establish their own independence and adulthood: as he expresses it, 'the womb becomes a tomb if it is not left behind'.

In this article I want to examine how the idea of the symbolic family drama can help us to look at a play such as Hamlet in a new way, and, in so doing, help us to understand some of the ways in which Shakespeare is developing his own concept of tragedy.

Four symbolic characters

In Brewer's thesis, there are only ever four characters in a symbolic story. The protagonist, the peer (their eventual mate), the mother and the father. In his view, all other major characters in a story can be seen in terms of a 'split' or alternate version of one of these characters, the 'splits' throwing a new perspective on our understanding of the

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This article first appeared in emagazine 49, September 2010.

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trials faced by the character, or perhaps just giving us an enriched sense of how the character functions. To succeed in growing up and marrying their peer, the protagonist has symbolically to 'kill' or neutralise their same-sex parent (who is threatened by their maturity), 'dodge' their opposite-sex parent (who wants to keep them in a stifling relationship) and so marry their peer. It is perhaps easiest to explain this idea by looking at a familiar fairy-tale, and one of the oldest of the archetypes which has been dated back thousands of years: Cinderella.

Cinderella

In this story, the protagonist is Cinderella, and her prospective peer is the Handsome Prince (or sometimes Prince Charming), a man characterised only by his role, rather than given a personal name. Cinderella's mother appears as a 'good' fairy godmother and a 'bad' wicked stepmother, who alternately enable and frustrate her struggle towards adulthood. In the most familiar version of the story, her father is absent or uncaring, though in other versions he also blocks her marriage to the Prince by colluding with the stepmother's ban on the Ball.

A male Cinderella

In symbolic terms, Hamlet is a male Cinderella figure. Overlooked and unappreciated since his mother's remarriage, he has to live with a wicked stepfather. His domestic situation is unhappy, and he is dressed in black as Cinderella is dressed in rags (though of course Claudius dislikes this public symbol of his feelings). Just as Cinderella is made to work in the home, and is not allowed to go to the ball, so Hamlet is confined to Elsinore (he even

states this explicitly when he says 'Denmark's a prison') and not allowed to return to Wittenberg. In order to escape from his situation, Hamlet needs to kill his stepfather (in real as well as symbolic terms), dodge his mother (and his obsessive interest in her sexuality) and marry Ophelia. This scenario is set up for us very early on in the play, and a great deal of the tension and tragedy in the story comes about as the audience finds its expectations of this potentially satisfying ending constantly raised and then defeated.

'Mirrors' for Hamlet

Hamlet, it has often been noted, has many characters who act in parallel with the protagonist. Just as Brewer's theory supposes, all these can be seen as 'splits' of the main character (or 'ugly sisters' in Cinderella terms). Thus Laertes mirrors Hamlet in many respects, being from the second scene of the play explicitly compared to him. Fortinbras is another 'spilt', the son of a dead king, ruled by his uncle, but managing to lead an army and fight nonetheless. Horatio, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can all be seen as similar 'splits'; the latter two even travel to England and die in Hamlet's place.

Laertes is perhaps the most persuasive 'split' for Hamlet, and is often referred to by critics as his 'foil' (a term Hamlet uses in Act 5 Scene 2 - interestingly Laertes sees this as an insult). He has many similarities to Hamlet, the most powerful being that his father has also been murdered, and that he too seeks revenge.

Hamlet's entrapment in his unhappy family drama is made clearer by his opposition to Laertes, who although clearly loved by his father (and sometimes annoyed by him) is

supported by Polonius in his desire to leave home. The parental desire for control is only expressed second-hand through Reynaldo, who, although he may spy on Laertes, also gives him money and letters. When Laertes returns from Paris to avenge Polonius's death, his rage is a striking contrast to Hamlet's 'crafty madness', and his language is full of echoes of what Hamlet says and does. For instance, his bold declaration 'I dare damnation' (Act 4 Scene 4) echoes Hamlet's cautious 'the spirit...perhaps...abuses me to damn me' (Act 2 Scene 2). His assertion that to fail in revenge would be to brand a harlot's mark on his mother's brow (a comment aimed at Gertrude) reflects Hamlet's attitude to his mother; and where Hamlet decides his urge to kill Claudius at prayer 'must be scann'd', Laertes voices only a deep desire
to cut his [Hamlet's] throat i 'the church.

Indeed, when it comes to uses of the actual word 'revenge' in Hamlet, only five are by Hamlet, while three are by Laertes, with their respective coaches, the Ghost and Claudius, having two mentions each.

Hamlet himself, perhaps Shakespeare's most reflective character, forgives Laertes for his aggression towards him by Ophelia's grave precisely because

> *by the image of my cause, I see the portraiture of his*
> *Act 5 Scene 2*

In many ways Laertes seems to be the revenger that Hamlet longs to be, rushing impetuously to kill the man he suspects of his father's death in a way Hamlet cannot do.

Laertes is also 'loved of the distracted multitude' as Claudius says about Hamlet; the rabble cry 'Laertes shall be King' as he makes his attempt on Claudius.

However, there are also key aspects of Laertes which teach us about Hamlet's virtues. He is arrogant about his abilities with the sword - a contrast to Hamlet, who tells Horatio he has been 'in continual practice', and who betters his opponent because of it. He is also manipulated and deceived by Claudius, whom he trusts, and most importantly, he acts 'gainst my conscience' in Act 5, proving that Hamlet's comment in Act 3 that 'conscience doth make cowards of us all' actually marks his own good sense and restraint.

The importance of Ophelia

Hamlet's stepfather, and his subordinate status in relation to him, creates a major bar to his potential marriage to Ophelia. The removal of Claudius becomes more than just an Oedipal struggle for autonomy, and seems essential for the marriage of the hero.

It is striking that while Hamlet's mother twice mentions her hope that Ophelia will be the future bride of Hamlet, his stepfather is notably silent on the subject, and instead contemptuously comments:

> *Love? His affections do not that way tend*

on the one occasion that he sees the couple together (Act 3 Scene 1). The importance of Ophelia to the play has often been debated, and some critics have even professed

to find it difficult to see the purpose of her inclusion, but as Hamlet's prospective peer she is essential to the nature of the family drama, and this reading brings out her symbolic power. It is not until the death of Ophelia at the end of Act 4 that we realise that the play cannot escape its tragic momentum - and the poignancy of Hamlet's declaration of love at the grave of his potential bride is made still sharper by the audience's awareness that there is, literally, no other woman in the world (of the play) whom he could marry, something which forces the drama irresistibly towards tragedy.

From fairy-tale to tragedy

Hamlet is helped in his endeavour to overcome Claudius not by a fairy godfather, but by an equally supernatural intervention - the ghost of his dead father. The ghost limits him, as Cinderella's godmother does with the curfew, by instructing him not to harm his mother. It also helps him by telling him the details of Claudius's crime. As in Cinderella, it is the protagonist's refusal to take account of the warning which ultimately leads to disaster. Hamlet's fascination with his mother's relationship with Claudius and his consequent threats to Gertrude precipitate Polonius's murder, and hence Ophelia's madness and death. However, in Hamlet there is no episode which is equivalent to Cinderella's lost slipper; his mistake, once made, cannot be retrieved. Once the protagonist has killed, we are no longer in the realms of the fairy-tale, and tragedy is far less forgiving than folk-story.