

Postgraduate English

www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english

ISSN 1756-9761

Issue 13

March 2006

Editors: Ollie Taylor and Kostas Boyiopoulos

Slaying Daddy: Subverting the Filial Elegy in Sharon Olds's The Father

Anna Woodford*

* University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne

Slaying Daddy: Subverting the Filial Elegy in Sharon Olds's The Father

Anna Woodford

University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne

Postgraduate English, Issue 13, March 2006

The definite article in the title of Sharon Olds's *The Father* (TF) alludes to a cultural and historical archetype. Gertrude Stein, writing in the late 1930s, makes the point wittily and lethally:

There is too much fathering going on just now and there is no doubt about it fathers are depressing. Everybody nowadays is a father, there is father Mussolini and father Hitler and father Roosevelt and father Stalin and father Lewis and father Blum and father Franco is just commencing now and there are ever so many more ready to be one.^[1]

Contemporary elegists have used the death of 'The' father to examine the patriarchal role. Elizabeth Butler Cullingford defines Plath's "Daddy" as 'God, devil, fascist, leader, father, husband (we may add traditional Freudian psychoanalyst, although she [Plath] did not)'^[2]. Filial elegies have expressed personal and political anxieties and described disenchantment with the family romance. They have broken the silence of oppressive childhoods and highlighted and created divisions in the family unit, threatening the unity of wider society.

During the last century, as the site of the deathbed shifted from home to hospital, poets began to describe deaths negotiated by advances in medicine. The subject is no longer shrouded: a reader may safely assume mention of brow or breast in a contemporary elegy refers to an actual body part rather than a metaphorical co-ordinate. The absence of God in a secular era leaves poets, literally, holding the body. If male poets have used the female body for their own ends, then female poets, notably American poets, may be said to have used the male corpse.

Ostensibly writing to commemorate the love object, the father's death provides poets with an opportunity to examine the shifting identity of the daughter speaker.

This paper shall examine how *TF* negotiates between the anger of the Confessionals and a contemporary trend towards consolation identified by Ramazani.^[3] Plath uses the figure of the vampire throughout "Daddy": the father who has bitten the speaker's 'pretty red heart in two' winds up with a stake in 'his fat black heart'. The second man, who has drunk the speaker's blood, is specifically identified as a 'vampire'. Both figures are killed by the speaker within the psychodrama of the poem. She is at once slayer and prey. The last line of the poem with the highly ambiguous meaning of the phrase 'I'm through' must leave the reader unconvinced as to the success of the exorcism. Olds's vampiric daughter, a literary descendant of Plath's, hovers by her father's bedside. Throughout *TF* she appears to gain strength from the death-watch. Ultimately, in the final poem of the collection "My Father Speaks To Me from the Dead", she re-animates the father. He is kept alive in order for the speaker, unlike Plath's daughter, to achieve a successful mourning period.

The anger in *TF* is more muted than that of "Daddy: where Olds's literary foremothers get mad, she tends to get even. Her father, unlike 'daddy', is not a 'bastard' as she informs us with a mischievous line break in "Waste Sonata": 'My father was not a shit. He was a man/ failing at life'(40-41). Brian Dillon comments:

The speaker's refusal to damn the father and assert that the speaker herself emerged irreparably scarred from her seemingly traumatic childhood experiences, suggests Olds's intentional willingness to avoid the label "confessional" poet, her resistance to make poetry centred on anger and shame.^[4]

However Olds's refusal to damn the father is noteworthy because of the damning nature of her filial portrait. Throughout her work, she characteristically leads her reader to draw a conclusion that goes beyond or is at odds with her surface

statement: a process often achieved by ingenious line-breaks. Such a method of delivery is particularly appropriate for Olds's subject matter where she invites the reader to share taboo material. We know, even if we have not read the previous collections, that the father was indeed a shit or why the need for this rueful defence? "June 24" in *The Gold Cell (TGC)* which precedes *The Father (TF)*, describes a metaphorical death and resurrection before the physical death of the following collection:

You died night after night in the years of my childhood,
 sinking down into speechless torpor,
 and then you were told to leave for good
 and you left, for better, for worse, for a long
 time I did not see you or touch you-
 and then, as if to disprove the ascendancy of darkness,
 little by little you came back to me
 until now I have you a living father (21-28)

The father's stated 'long time' in the wilderness is unrecorded: he features throughout *TGC* though "June 24" signals a sea-change. By the time he appears in *TF* he appears to be a changed man. In "Nullipara" daughter and father sit side by side: 'The last morning of my visit, we sit/ in our bathrobes, cronies, we cross and re-cross/ our legs' (1-3). The lines echo the blissful companionship of the speaker and her husband in "Primitive" from Olds's first collection *Satan Says (SS)*. This is the fragile happiness of the briefly re-united Lear and Cordelia with gender positions subverted. The title nullipara, a medical term for a woman who has not given birth, alerts a reader to something uncanny in this filial exchange beyond the fact of the father's dying. The piece ends: "He knows he will live in me / after he is dead, I will carry him like a mother. / I do not know if I will ever deliver" (16-18). Grieving requires assimilation, not gestation and delivery. The

piece denies the speaker her children. Beyond serving the central conceit, the title defines the speaker solely as a daughter. This infantilises her and hints at the stunted nature of the filial relationship which is accentuated by the absence of her husband and children in the first half of this collection. “The Glass”, a poem about the father coughing up phlegm, in *TGC* would have prompted a flashback to his alcoholism but in the kinder climate of *TF* there is no such association. However readers are expected to see an incipient satisfaction in these lines:

my father the old earth that used to
lie at the center of the universe, now
turning with the rest of us
around his death (34-37)

By the eighth poem of the collection, “His Terror”, the reader is back in the gothic territory of the speaker’s childhood:

like the ballerina who un-
bent, when I opened my jewelry box, she
rose and twirled like the dead. Then the lid
folded her down, bowing, in the dark,
the way I would wait, under my bed,
for morning. My father has forgotten that (4-9)

The same jewellery box is mentioned in *SS*. In the earlier poem the speaker is literally boxed in by her past. In “His Terror” the speaker acknowledges her father has forgotten this past either through the current illness of cancer or through the earlier illness of alcoholism. He is beyond reproach, due to the unwritten reconciliation and due to his illness. If the speaker has forgiven, she has not forgotten: there is an implicit threat in her remembrance. Dillon comments:

[...] the reader who wonders whether the speaker extracts an apology from the father and if the pains of the past are smoothed over in a final emotionally-charged dialogue, misses the point of this book. It is precisely the silence of the father that creates an enormous emptiness that these poems try to fill, silence that provokes multiple conjectures as to who the father is and why his dying and death so confound the speaker.^[5]

The speaker's silent accusation, expressed through the subverted filial portraits of the poems, maintains the status quo while providing her with an opportunity to bear witness. The father's silence is (almost) absolute. He speaks only thirty five words throughout the collection, ten of them are recollections from the speaker's childhood. The remaining speech, consisting of one or two word commands for a 'back rub' or for the bed to be altered 'Up! Up!', finally breaks down in "The Request": 'Rass-ih-AA, rass-ih-AA.../Rass-ih-BAA.../...Frass-ih-BAA "Frances Back!" (17,19,21). Significantly it is the speaker who interprets the final non-italicized quote. In "My Father Speaks to Me from the Dead" and "When the Dead Ask My Father About Me" she appropriates the paternal mouthpiece, consider this extract from the latter poem:

She could

speak, you see. As if my own
jaws, throat, and larynx had come
alive in her. But all she wanted
was that dirt from my tongue, umber lump you could
pass, mouth-to-mouth, she wanted us to
lie down, in a birth-room, and me
to labor it out, lever it into her
mouth I am audible, listen! this is *my* song. (35-43)

Whose song? A reader is goaded into interjecting. Dillon's 'multiple conjectures' as to the father's identity presume his centrality: a reader may conjecture more usefully as to the centrality of the speaker. The father functions largely as a falling icon, diminishing in size and finally dying on page thirty five of a seventy nine page book. He is whittled down literally and figuratively to show the daughter's increasing understanding and acceptance of the basis of their relationship. This is not simply to settle old familial scores. The father is given an opportunity to become mortal and therefore vulnerable although the reconciliation scene the speaker hankers after never manifests. There is an imperative in *TF* for the speaker to survive her father's death. Throughout the book every character is defined in relation to him: 'his wife'; 'my father's wife'; 'I am his flesh'. 'His daughter' must forge a new identity. The prominence given to her framing perspective begs an obvious alternative title for Olds's collection: *The Daughter*. The father is absent for the majority of the poems and, where he does feature, his appearance is posthumous. Much of *TF* concentrates on a fruitless quest for conciliation. If the father was to jump off his deathbed or to embrace his daughter, he would be making a bid for an active part in *The Daughter*. The reader knows this is not going to happen. The subtext depends on the father's silence, his inevitable death and subsequent absence which (pre) occupies half of the book.

The poems in the first half of *TF* were written during 1983 and 1984, the second half of the book with its meditations on the alcoholic father of the speaker's childhood was written more slowly at a rate of one or two poems a year between 1984 and 1989. The first half of the collection tends to focus on the physicality of the reincarnated father. If it is bad form to speak ill of the dead, it is perhaps worse to speak ill of the dying. Thus in the first half of the book, the speaker's acknowledgement of the troubled past is muted. In "The Want" she insists: 'I had stopped / longing for him to address me from his heart / before he died'(17-

19). The criticism is hidden beneath a surface acceptance. In “Wonder” the speaker muses:

If I had dared to imagine
trading I might have wished to trade
places with anyone raised on love,
but how would anyone raised on love
bear this death? (26-30)

With more ease than anyone raised on hate, a reader is justified in thinking. The traditional elegiac consolation is cold comfort and ‘dared’ indicates the breakthrough the speaker has made to achieve her present awareness. In “The Struggle” the father is described in painstaking detail:

Later the doctor would pay a call and as
soon as my father saw that white coat
he would start to labor up, desperate
to honor the coat, at a glimpse of it he would
start to stir like a dog who could not
not obey (14-19)

The neat line break on ‘not’ keeps the father struggling in the poem. There follows the inevitable scenario:

And then, one day, he tried,
his brain ordered his body to heave up,
the sweat rose in his pores but he was not
moving, he cast up his eyes as the minister

leaned to kiss him, he lay and stared, it was
 nothing like the nights he had lain on the couch passed
 out, nothing. Now he was alive,
 awake, the raw boy of his heart stood
 up each time a grown man
 entered his death room. (24-33)

Prolonging the illness of the father and committing it to paper makes the daughter-speaker its agent. She compares the father to a child though it is the father figure of the minister, not her, who is his superior. In “The Request” the speaker reminds us: ‘He lay like one fallen from a high / place’(1-2). The ‘high place’, presumably referring to the father’s old power, was morally low. The speaker may be seen to be gloating at his downfall or celebrating it – it is after all this maimed Rochester she is able to love. The fall also refers to the withdrawal of the speaker’s gaze which relegates him to this position in the text. He is fallen from the former seat of her affections or fear. At the end of “Close to Death” the speaker’s mercy is strained: ‘I will go to him / and give to him, what he gave me I will give him, / the earth, night, sleep, beauty, fear’(17-19). The title “Close to Death” is a pun, referring ostensibly to the father’s state but also to the speaker’s voyeurism, giving a reader two alternative subjects for the piece.

The father is gradually reduced to less than a sum of his diminishing parts in the collection, his body prefiguring the dead body that is to come. It is apparent that the speaker is looking for some sort of reconciliation. Her increasingly futile quest however is motivated, at least in part, by her own survival. After her father’s death she rises, ‘Aphrodite like’, from his body commenting in “Beyond Harm”: ‘I suddenly thought, with amazement, he will always/ love me now, and I laughed-he was dead, dead!’(25-26). The cry echoes like the last laugh of the speaker in Plath’s “Lady Lazarus”. The victory in “Lady Lazarus” is hollow: the vampiric speaker sharing the fate of her undead victims. Paul Barber has

demonstrated how the phenomenon of the vampire originated from the fear of death, and its signifier the corpse, in pre-literature cultures. He comments: ‘Our sources, in Europe, as elsewhere, show a remarkable unanimity on this point: the dead may bring us death. To prevent this we must lay them to rest properly, propitiate them, and, when all else fails, kill them a second time’(3). Plath’s father is killed twice and still a reader comes away with the feeling - to borrow a phrase from Elizabeth Jennings - ‘that the death may not be done’. All elegists, who describe dying enact a literary killing. Twentieth century elegies exploit this tension. While Plath overtly commits patricide, Olds’s murderous impulses are distanced. In “The Cigars” her speaker muses on her annual birthday gift to her father: ‘And the cancer / came from smoking and drinking. So I killed him’(19-20). In “Letter to My Father from 40,000 feet” she fantasises about hurting a father figure while another of her poems is more explicitly titled “Death and Murder”. Elegies prolong the subject’s suffering, especially elegies where the theme is such suffering. Olds’s speaker is reluctant to relinquish the body after death. In *TF* there are six poems about the father’s corpse. The speaker lingers over the body at, according to Barber, a dangerous time:

While the body is still changing, still decomposing, it is still involved with the world, still a potential source of trouble. For that to end, the corpse must be rendered inert, and unless this process is sped up by chemicals or fire, it is not completed until the flesh has decayed from the bones (3)

The superstitions Barber describes are normatively dealt with by mourning and burial. Although it is interesting to note that in civilized societies where new illnesses present such fears rise to the fore.^[6] In an essay on female authored vampires Kathy Davis pinpoints a key characteristic of Olds’s speaker:

These vampires are driven by more than just a lust for blood or power – they are driven by love, by empathy, by a desire for communion with humans, with each other, and with their own unwritten history.

Fundamentally, all these drives are pointed towards one goal: survival.^[7]

Olds's speaker, clearly motivated by survival, comments in "Waste Sonata": 'I could not live with hating him. / I did not see that I had to' (18-19). She is aware of the impact a lack of forgiveness will have on her own life. As she resignedly comments in "Death and Murder":

We tried to keep him alive, cut him and
 piped him, tubed him, reamed him, practically
 keelhailed him and it could not be done,
 death took him (1-4)

The speaker is part of a collective 'we': separate from the father, she does not share his fate. She exhibits some of the symptoms of the Freudian (and Plathian) melancholic but finally accepts and assimilates the death indicating a successful mourning period.

Endnotes

- [1] Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (New York: Vintage 1973) 133.
- [2] Elizabeth Butler-Cullingford, "A Father's Prayer, A Daughter's Anger: WB Yeats and Sylvia Plath," *Daughters and Fathers* ed. Boose, Lynda E and Flowers, Betty S., (John Hopkins University Press: 1989) 252.
- [3] Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry Of Mourning: The Modern Elegy From Hardy To Heaney* (Chicago: Chicago University Press 1994).
- [4] Brian Dillon, "'Never Having Had You, I Cannot Let You Go': Sharon Olds's Poems of a Father-Daughter Relationship" *Literary Review* Fall 1993, 37:1
 <<http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>>
- [5] Brian Dillon "Never having had you, I cannot let you go"
- [6] Susan Sontag's seminal text *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors*. (London: Penguin, 2002) explores the myths surrounding certain illnesses.

^[7] Kathy S. Davis, "Beauty in the Beast: The 'feminization' of Weyland in The Vampire Tapestry," *Extrapolation* 43:1 Spring 2002: 62-79 (Kent State University, Kent, OH)<http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>.

Works Cited

Barber, Paul. *Vampires, Burial and Death: Folklore and Reality*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

Olds, Sharon. *The Gold Cell*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989

---. *The Father*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.

---. *The Unswept Room*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.

Plath, Sylvia. *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes. London; Boston: Faber, 1981.