

Parents and Surrogate Parents

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The relationship most commonly represented in literature is probably the romantic/sexual relationship between a man and a woman (or, occasionally, between two people of the same gender). However, the parent-child relationship is found almost as frequently. This is not always a biological relationship: a text will often make it clear that two people from different generations exist in either a formal or informal surrogate parent-child relationship.

The main action of *Floris and Blanchefleur* is initiated by the fairly standard situation of a parent who does not agree with his child's choice of romantic partner. In this case, there is a slight twist, in that the Saracen king is effectively father to both children, even though he only has a blood relationship with Floris. However, when he realises that the children love each other, and "when they were of age, / That her love wolde noght swage, / Nor he might noght her love withdraw / When Florys shuld wife after the lawe"¹, he shows no hesitation in sacrificing Blanchefleur to protect the future of his biological child. It is only the intervention of his Queen that prevents him from ordering Blanchefleur's death; and, had Floris not attempted suicide over her supposed "death", it is likely that he would never have learned the truth. Although he is ultimately redeemed, the King fails both his child and his surrogate child in the handling of this situation.

The King of Hungary, in *The Squire of Low Degree*, is also faced with the dilemma of an "unsuitable" partnership for his child. However, he reacts in a unique and idiosyncratic manner. Furthermore, whereas in *Floris and Blanchefleur*, and other similar romances, parental opposition is merely the catalyst for the main action of the story, in *The Squire of Low Degree* the king's

¹ *Floris and Blanchefleur*, in Diane Speed ed *ENGL 6952 Course Reader*, University of Sydney, 3 – 24 (based on manuscript dated ca 1400), ll. 37-40.

relationships with his daughter and his future son-in-law form much of the actual basis of the story.

When the steward tells the king about the conversation he overheard between the king's daughter and the squire, the king does not fly into a rage. Rather, he says that

I may not beleve, be nyght nor daye,
 My doughter dere he wyll betreaye,
 Nor come her chamber nye,
 That fode to longe with no foly,
 Thought she would to hym consente,
 That lovely lady fayre and gente.
 I truste hym so well, withouten drede,
 That he would never do that dede
 By yf he might that lady wynne,
 In wedlocke to welde withouten synne.²

He further adds that if his daughter should assent, the squire "is wrothy to have none yll; / For I have sene that manyh a page / Have become men by marriage"³. Rather than rejecting his daughter's suitor, the king shows that he would actively welcome him.⁴ In spite of this, however, he does agree to let the steward spy on them, just in case he is mistaken ... or perhaps as part of a longer term plan.

The king willingly gives the squire permission to "passe the sea"⁵ in order to be "proved a venterous knight"⁶. Later on, after the squire has been captured

² *The Squire of Low Degree or Undo Your Door*, in Diane Speed ed *ENGL 6952 Course Reader*, University of Sydney, 25 – 48, (based on William Copeland printing dated between 1550 and 1560), ll. 361-370.

³ *ibid.* ll. 372-4.

⁴ This may have something to do with the fact that, that very evening, the king has for the first time noticed the squire (who has been serving him for seven years!), and reacted in a manner that does not seem exactly paternal: "The kyng behelde the squyer wele ... He thought he was the semylyest man That ever in the worlde he saw or than. Thus sate the kyng and eate right nought, But on his squire was all his thought" (ll 333-338). However, it is possible that this is simply the first time that he had considered the squire as a potential suitor for his daughter, and successor to himself: certainly, for the remainder of the story, this is the only light in which he views him.

⁵ *The Squire of Low Degree*, *op. cit.* l. 472.

outside the princess's door, and imprisoned, the king releases him and again sends him on his way, with a promise that when he returns "Than shalt thou wedde my doughter dere / And have my landes both farree and nere"⁷. Before the squire departed for the first time, the king offered him "golde and fe / And strength of men to wende with thee"⁸; after the imprisonment, he gives him additional "lande and fe"⁹: it appears that he genuinely wants the squire to succeed in his quest, and prove worthy of a king's daughter¹⁰. This does not seem to be simply a ploy to get rid of him.

However, if the king's relationship with his surrogate son seems to be generally supportive and well-disposed, the actions he takes in connection with his biological daughter are more puzzling, and, in fact, border on the bizarre. It is presumably on the king's instructions that the guards disfigure the body of the steward, dress it in the squire's clothes, and leave it outside the daughter's door – apparently with the sole intention of making her believe that her beloved is dead. He then adds to this by allowing her to suffer for *seven years*, offering her a variety of enticements to rouse her from depression, but all the while withholding the one thing – the truth – that he knows full well would do this: "Her father knewe it every deale, / But he kept it in counsele"¹¹. These do not appear to be the actions of a loving and considerate father.

Glenn Wright suggests that "In terms of internal logic and motivation, the disguising of the steward's corpse as the squire's is in fact the most problematic event in the romance. ... While nothing in the surviving texts hints that the king,

⁶ *ibid.* l. 478.

⁷ *ibid.* ll. 879-880

⁸ *ibid.* ll. 481-2

⁹ *ibid.* l. 883

¹⁰ The squire has, of course, already passed the first test set by the king, in that he did not, in fact, seduce the king's daughter; and further, he was able to defend himself successfully against seven men, killing all of them.

¹¹ *The Squire of Low Degree, op. cit.* ll. 737-8

uncannily anticipating how events would unfold, orders the weird substitution in advance, such may have been a part of the story's original narrative integuement."¹² Although it is never explicitly stated, most readers do ultimately accept this "grossly hypothetical motive" (which, as Wright points out, "emerges only in retrospect. The steward's disfigurement and disguise, when it occurs, comes as pure and ... unmotivated motive"¹³.)

However, even allowing that this peculiar action was ordered by the king, we are still left with the question of *why*. Wright takes the view that the king is giving himself "seven years in which to urge his daughter to a more socially felicitous marriage, while simultaneously allowing the squire to get some knightly credentials under his belt in case she should prove intractable"¹⁴. In other words, the king, like his counterpart in *Floris and Blancheflour*, does, in fact, frown on the match. However, this does not seem entirely consistent with his very active encouragement of the squire – not to mention the promises he makes to him.

Margaret Allen and J C Spearing offer alternative readings, in which the king is actively promoting the match, but requires that his daughter, as well as the squire, must undergo seven years of trials to prove herself worthy.

Allen suggests that the daughter is overly concerned with "material matters". Thus, she does not believe her father will see the squire's true worth until he has achieved a higher rank; and, furthermore, the reason she fails to recognise the body of that of the steward is because "her eyes are so blinded by material considerations that she is unable to perceive the deception"¹⁵. In Allen's view, the king recognises this limitation in his daughter, and thus, although he loves her, he

¹² Wright, Glenn. "Other Wyse Then Must We Do": Parody and Popular Narrative in *The Squyr of Lowe Degre*, *Comitatus* 27 (1996), p. 30.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ Allen, Margaret J. 'The Harlot and the Mourning Bride', in Jane Campbell and James Doyle, eds, *The Practical Vision: Essays in English Literature in Honour of Flora Roy*, Waterloo, Ontario: Laurier University Press, 1978, p. 23.

“permits her to be chastened by grief until she has overcome this dependence on external appearances”¹⁶.

Similarly, Spearing takes the view that what the daughter undergoes is a “horrifyingly extreme test of devotion”¹⁷. However, he argues that, in the end, it is essentially about power. The “power of the king is also the power of the father as perceived by the child, a power to know what the child believes to be secret and to be, in effect, the narrator of the child’s life”¹⁸. He quotes Kiernan Ryan’s 1989 view of Prospero, and suggests that while both characters are instigators of the happy ending, each is also a “brooding embodiment of patriarchal authority and absolute power, who dominates everyone ... and determines everything that happens to them”¹⁹. He points out that the king’s authority is “beyond question or understanding, and is exercised with what seems unfeeling cruelty”²⁰.

The problem is, the king’s motives for his actions remain unstated: after the truth has been revealed, the daughter twice asks “Alas, father, why dyd ye so?”²¹, but is never given a satisfactory answer. Clearly, the father-daughter relationship is absolutely central to the story. However, we simply do not have enough information to know what this relationship is – plausible arguments can be made for the king as a wise father ensuring his daughter is worthy of her suitor (Allen’s view); as a figure of absolute patriarchal authority (Spearing); or even as a father who simply wants to defer the decision in the hope his daughter will change her mind (Wright). Perhaps the answer was clear to the contemporary audience: the twenty-first century reader, however, is likely to be left with a sense of uncertainty.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Spearing, A. C. ‘Secrecy, Listening, and Telling in *The Squyr of Lowe Degree*’, *English Studies in Canada* 7 (1981), p. 286.

¹⁸ *ibid.* p. 291.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, quoting Kiernan Ryan (1989)

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *The Squire of Low Degree*, *op. cit.* l. 987 and l. 1043.

Like the medieval texts, Erich Segal's *Love Story* is also about a perceived *mésalliance*. As with *Floris and Blancheflour*, the storyline revolves around the young lovers, rather than focusing primarily on parent-child interactions. Nevertheless, the relationship between Oliver Barrett and his father is nearly as important (and some would argue more important) as that between Oliver and Jennifer. In this case, the very poor relationship between father and son is contrasted to the good one between Phil Cavilleri and his daughter – a relationship which is happily extended to include Oliver.

While Oliver Barrett cannot escape the presence of his father, James Bond was orphaned at the age of eleven (a fact we learn in a later Bond novel, *You Only Live Twice*). However, although his biological parents are long since dead, James Bond invariably has one – and frequently two – father figures in the books.

In *Casino Royale*, this role is taken by Le Chiffre, the villain of the piece. For much of the novel, he acts simply as an adversary to Bond. However, once Bond is “utterly and absolutely in [Le Chiffre’s] power”²², this relationship changes:

‘My dear boy,’ Le Chiffre spoke like a father, ‘the game of Red Indians is over, quite over. You have stumbled by mischance into a game for grown-ups and you have already found it a painful experience. You are not equipped, my dear boy, to play games with adults and it was very foolish of your nanny in London to have sent you out here with your spade and bucket.’²³

Le Chiffre places himself in the position of a father reprimanding his son: he speaks “like a father”, and everything he says is designed to make Bond feel “hopelessly stupid and childish”²⁴. In this regard, he sets a pattern for the villains in most of the later novels. Kingsley Amis argues convincingly that Le Chiffre and his successors represent the father “at his moment of wrath”²⁵.

²² Fleming, Ian. *Casino Royale*. London, Reading and Fakenham, Pan Books p. 116.

²³ *ibid.* p. 120-1.

²⁴ Amis, Kingsley. *The James Bond Dossier*. London, Jonathan Cape, 1965, p. 68.

²⁵ Lilli, Laura. ‘James Bond and Criticism’, in Oreste Del Buono and Umberto Eco, eds (translated by R. A. Downie), *The Bond Affair*, London, Macdonald, 1965, p. 155.

The majority of the Bond books actually have two opposing father-figures. On the one hand is the “angry and frightening” villain-father, while “Admiral Sir Miles Messervy, K.C.M.G., alias M, is the stern but lovable version ... M is an analogue of ... a father of pre-1939 vintage”²⁶. M is very much a minor figure in *Casino Royale*, but in later novels his role as Bond’s surrogate father cannot be ignored. Where Le Chiffre caused Bond to question his ideology, M “represents those values which most forcefully articulate an ideology of Englishness: the values of duty, country, method and measure”²⁷. M’s role as surrogate-parent is perhaps most clearly demonstrated at the beginning of *The Man With the Golden Gun* where that most archetypal of father-son relationships, the Oedipus myth, is replayed.

In *Peyton Place*, Grace Metalious presents numerous examples of relationships between parents/surrogate-parent and children. An interesting feature of this work is that, almost without fail, the biological parents mistreat, or fundamentally misunderstand, their children; and those children who survive adolescence successfully tend to be the ones who have built up relationships with surrogate parents.

There are, of course, exceptions to this. Kathy Ellsworth appears to have a good relationship with her family, and grows up emotionally (though not physically) unscathed. However, she is a relatively minor character in the book; most of the major characters, even if they do ultimately prosper, pass through difficult patches – often caused by failings of their parents – and only survive them with the support of surrogate parents.

Two characters who notably fail to survive are Rodney Harrington (who is killed) and Norman Page (who is emotionally crippled). On the surface, Rodney appears to have a good relationship with his father, and certainly Rodney views it as such: “Rodney had never missed his mother. He and the old man got along

²⁶ Amis, *op. cit.* p. 71.

²⁷ Bennett, Tony and Woollacott, Janet. *Bond and Beyond*. London, Macmillan Education, 1987, p. 74.

swell. They understood each other”²⁸. In fact, however, while Rodney may understand his father – he certainly knows that it is “politic for him to please his father whenever he could, especially when it involved no sacrifice on his part”²⁹ - Leslie Harrington is “badly mistaken” in his belief that his son has “gumption”³⁰. Rather than being a strong character, with a drive to succeed like his father, Rodney is

weak in the terrible, final way in which only those who are protected and surrounded by powerful externals are weak. Rodney never had to be strong, for strength was all around him, ready-made to protect and shield him.³¹

From paying off Betty Anderson to getting Rodney an “essential” job during the war, Leslie protects and spoils his son, and thus never forces him to face his own weakness, or deal with his own mistakes. Unlike Leslie, observers such as Matthew Swain and Seth Buswell can see the damage this treatment is doing:

“... we’ll be scraping young Harrington off a road somewhere.”

“It’ll be Leslie’s fault if you do. Damned foolishness, buyin’ a sixteen-year-old kid three thousand dollars’ worth of convertible coupé.”

“Especially Rodney Harrington,” said the doctor. “That kid’s got as much sense as a flea. ... I saw him over to White River last week. He had that convertible piled full of kids, and they were all drinking. Leslie about bit my head off when I told him about it. Told me to mind my own business and let the kid sow a few wild oats. Wild oats at sixteen.”³²

Ultimately, of course, the doctor’s prophecy proves correct: Rodney is, indeed, “scraped off a road”.

Norman Page suffers from an exceedingly unhealthy relationship with a mother who overprotects him to an extent that can be viewed as abuse. Nellie Cross tells Allison that Mrs Page “Tit-fed that son of hers ’til he was four years old. That kid had teeth as solid as the ones in your head right now, and perfectly fine lady

²⁸ Metalious, Grace. *Peyton Place*. New York, Simon & Schuster, 1956, p. 196.

²⁹ *ibid.* p. 206.

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.* p. 135-6.

Evelyn Page was still nursin' him and lovin' every minute of it"³³. Whether or not this is true, certainly Evelyn demands exclusive love from her son, and if he shows signs of impatience she manipulates him shamelessly:

Mrs Page sank down into her rocking chair and began to cry, and Norman, stricken with shame and guilt, ran to her. ...

"Do you love Mother, Norman?"

Norman's sobs were dry and painful now, and he hiccuped wretchedly.

"Oh yes, Mother. I love only you. I love you better than God, even."³⁴

She has also developed the peculiar practice of giving her son enemas (from which he gets a "bittersweet sort of pleasure"³⁵). Dr Swain views this as a form of incest: "Let me tell you about a case I saw once, a young boy with the worst case of dehydration I ever saw. It came from getting too many enemas that he didn't need. Sex, with a capital S-E-X"³⁶.

Dr Swain believes that Norman will not be strong enough to fight his mother: "She expects too much from him – love, admiration, eventual financial support, unquestioning loyalty, even sex"³⁷. In fact, however, Norman, although bullied as a small child, does appear to be surviving ... until Constance MacKenzie accuses him of seducing Allison. This forces him back into his mother's control, after which, in quick succession, he suffers first through Nellie's funeral, then a disturbingly explicit voyeuristic experience, and finally the death of Miss Hester and his own strangling of her cat. He no longer has the will to break away from his mother, and this affects his emotional stability. He is unable to succeed in the Army, going psychoneurotic under fire. He tries, but fails, to resist her demands that he pretend to be a wounded hero, and our final view is of him having erotic nightmares about Allison and his mother, working an undemanding job for Seth Buswell, and

³³ *ibid.* p. 188.

³⁴ *ibid.* p. 71-2.

³⁵ *ibid.* p. 62.

³⁶ *ibid.* p. 137.

³⁷ *ibid.*

“[carrying] his pay check home to his mother, uncashed, at the end of every week”³⁸.

Selina and Joey Cross suffer neglect from their mother. More importantly, Selina suffers physical and psychological abuse from her stepfather – probably the only example in the book of a destructive relationship with a surrogate parent. It should be noted, however, that Selina’s story was “lifted from a real-life scandal: Eight years before Metalious finished *Peyton Place*, a 20-year-old Gilmanton woman confessed to shooting her father to death, after years of repeated rapes and beatings. Her younger brother helped her kill him and bury the body beneath the family's sheep pen”³⁹. This father-daughter abuse was changed to stepfather-daughter by Metalious’ publisher, who presumably felt that the reading public were not prepared for such a complete betrayal of biological ties.

However, Selina and Joey survive their neglectful and abusive parents due to the support of a number of surrogate parents. Although Constance MacKenzie initially disapproves of Selina, she comes to understand her better than her own daughter, Allison. For example, when Selina is looking at a dress, Constance “could understand a girl looking that way at the sight of a beautiful dress. The only time that Allison ever wore this expression was when she was reading⁴⁰”. As time goes by, Constance develops “a deep affection for the stepdaughter of Lucas Cross. She found her intelligent and a good worker, but it was with a feeling of shock that Constance sometimes found herself discussing adult questions with a child who could answer her in kind”⁴¹. Eventually, they become so friendly that “there were very few things that they had not discussed”⁴². Constance provides Selina with a role model that is simply not available in her own home.

³⁸ *ibid.* p. 209.

³⁹ Filosa, Gwen. ‘NH 100: Metalious's *Peyton Place* was controversial, popular’. *Concord Online Monitor*, March 27, 1999.

⁴⁰ Metalious, *op. cit.* p. 40.

⁴¹ *ibid.* p. 112.

⁴² *ibid.* p. 140.

After Lucas' departure and Nellie's suicide, Selina and Joey are truly parentless. When someone contacts state welfare about their situation, there is initially only one person to whom they can turn:

As soon as the social worker had stepped through the unlocked front door of the shack, Selina had grabbed Joey by the hand and fled to Constance MacKenzie. Constance, in deadly fear lest she be discovered, had hidden the Cross children in the cellar of her house while she contacted Seth Buswell and Charles Partridge. It had been Seth who had finally located the eldest of Lucas Cross's children, Selina's stepbrother Paul.⁴³

With the return of Paul and his wife, Selina and Joey find themselves with reliable surrogate parents who provide them with a stable family life.

Even after Paul and Gladys have left, Joey still has surrogate parents to turn to. His sister Selina takes over mothering him, and also – as Constance had done for her – is able to treat him with adult respect: “Selina always made him feel big and important. Like a man, instead of a kid. She depended on him, and liked to have him around”⁴⁴. Whereas, in their different ways, Leslie Harrington and Evelyn Page keep their children young and free of responsibility, Selina and Joey benefit from having surrogate parents who rely on them as well as providing them with support.

Jane Hendler suggests that in *Peyton Place* an “elite group of professional men continues to run the town, and, except for Leslie Harrington, this small coterie practices a kind of benevolent paternalism”⁴⁵. It was to members of this coterie that Constance turned to for help in protecting Selina and Joey. Later on, when Selina is tried for the murder of her stepfather, Peter Drake (who has conducted her defence) does not take credit for her acquittal, but rather says “this was Charlie Partridge's big case from beginning to end”⁴⁶.

⁴³ *ibid.* p. 268.

⁴⁴ *ibid.* p. 293.

⁴⁵ Hendler, Jane. *Best-Sellers and Their Film Adaptations in Postwar America*. New York, Peter Lang, 2001, p. 194.

⁴⁶ Metalious, *op. cit.* p. 349.

Of course, for Selina the most important “coterie” member is Matthew Swain. Dr Swain shows himself willing to violate the law – and some of his own principles – in order to perform the abortion that Selina needs. He is then responsible for forcing Lucas Cross to leave, and finally, at Selina’s trial, walks to the witness stand and makes these actions public in order to save her.

If Dr Swain is a benevolent father figure to all the young members of the Peyton Place community, then, to a lesser extent, Miss Thornton is their surrogate mother. However, she is only takes this role for “the short time [the children are] in the eighth grade”⁴⁷, whereas they can turn to Dr Swain at any time in their lives. Of course, for different reasons, the Rodney Harringtons and Norman Pages of the town do not draw upon these alternative sources of parental support.

An interesting feature of Constance MacKenzie is that, while she is an effective surrogate mother for Selina Cross, she largely fails her own daughter, Allison. Constance and Allison have “little in common with one another; the mother was of too cold and practical a mind to understand the sensitive, dreaming child, and Allison, too young and full of hopes and fancies to sympathize with her mother”⁴⁸.

Increasingly, Constance drifts apart from her daughter. When Constance expands her business (buying the vacant store next to the Thrifty Corner), she has “not much time to spend with her daughter these days”⁴⁹, although it is at this stage that her surrogate-parent relationship with Selina Cross begins to develop. Although she has “always tried to be patient and, to the limit of her ability, understand her daughter Allison”, after the arrival of Tom Makris she becomes “snappish and stubborn for no reason at all”⁵⁰.

⁴⁷ *ibid.* p. 268.

⁴⁸ *ibid.* p. 15.

⁴⁹ *ibid.* p. 92.

⁵⁰ *ibid.* p. 105.

However, her biggest failure towards Allison is in her unfounded concerns regarding Allison's sexuality. This is foreshadowed at Allison's birthday party, when Constance believes Allison may be involved in a kissing game, and tries to remember how old she herself was when she had begun to play such games. Upon realising that she was mistaken – Allison is playing in the role of the unknissed postmistress – Constance thinks "I should be more careful. I almost made a fool of myself"⁵¹. However, some years later, Constance does more than just make a fool of herself in a similar situation – she seriously injures her daughter, and creates a nearly unbridgeable gulf between the two of them. When Allison returns from a picnic with Norman, Constance first accuses her of being "off in the woods with this animal doing God knows what"⁵², and then, in the cruellest possible manner, reveals to Allison the truth behind her own birth.

Like Norman, Allison suffers a series of other traumatic events after this crisis – finding Nellie's body, seeing Kathy's arm torn off, and then the Ellsworth trial in which she is "made to feel that there was no one in Peyton Place who was her friend"⁵³ – and ultimately, she runs away from Peyton Place, to make a fresh start in New York. After she has left, Constance finally admits that she has failed her daughter: "I have so much, she thought guiltily. But I should have seen to it that Allison came first"⁵⁴.

Fortunately for Allison, she has a supportive surrogate father in Tom Makris. Even before marrying Constance, Tom is aware of Allison's talent for writing, and provides her with helpful guidance. He also understands her personality far better than does her mother. Although admitting that "Allison and I never came to understand one another as well as I should have liked"⁵⁵, he, unlike Constance, knows why she left Peyton Place. Constance is concerned that it was because of her

⁵¹ *ibid.* p. 51.

⁵² *ibid.* p. 235.

⁵³ *ibid.* p. 279.

⁵⁴ *ibid.* p. 274.

⁵⁵ *ibid.* p. 273.

marriage to Tom, but he knows that “she began to think of leaving here right after Nellie Cross killed herself”⁵⁶.

When she returns to Peyton Place, Tom immediately knows that something is wrong: “Something has happened. She has the same look that she always had whenever she was running away from a disagreeable experience. A man?”⁵⁷ She is far more able to talk to Tom than to her mother, and it is to him that she finally says “I’d like to make peace with my mother”⁵⁸.

Although Tom Makris does not provide Allison with the same degree of hands-on surrogate-parenting that Constance and others give to Selina and Joey, he is nevertheless a source of understanding and support, and it is partly due to him that Allison and her mother are finally able to be reconciled.

Peyton Place deals with many issues, and not the least of these is the importance of parent-child relationships, and the ability they have to support or destroy children. Similarly, *The Squire of Low Degree* spends far more time exploring the relationships between the king, his daughter and his future son-in-law than it does in presenting the adventures the squire undertakes in order to achieve the hand of his love. Other texts, such as *Floris and Blancheflour*, *Love Story* and Ian Fleming’s Bond novels, do not have parent-child relationships as a central element of the narrative, but they nevertheless form important components of the stories as a whole.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ *ibid.* p. 341.

⁵⁸ *ibid.* p. 369.

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