

My Daughter, The Queen of France

a roleplaying game directed by William Shakespeare

Better thou

Hadst not been born than not t'have pleased me better.

Lear, King Lear, I.i. 234-35

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(Daughter, Nature, Exile)

What Is This? – An Introduction

My Daughter, the Queen of France is a game about what it means to grow apart from the things you have made, and the efforts and contortions we go through to reconcile ourselves to that inevitable division. You will need at least three people to play the game, and no more than five. You will also need some paper and a pencil for everyone.

The story of the game revolves around the estrangement of William Shakespeare from his daughter. Upset and confused, the playwright struggles to answer the questions surrounding their falling out: why did it happen? who was at fault? what happened to the daughter he thought he knew, and to the life he imagined for her? Scenes from their life – together and apart – repeat themselves in his head, but different every time, so that he can never be sure what really happened, or why.

In an attempt to overcome his grief, Shakespeare decides to turn to his friends: actors, mostly, though some may also be writers themselves, or men of business, or even one or another of his noble patrons. And though they are Shakespeare's friends, they also knew his daughter, and have their own opinions about what happened between the two of them. Their interests may not align directly with Shakespeare's, but underneath it all there is a bond of friendship – and who could stand to see a friend suffer?

Together, Shakespeare and his friends will create, write, rehearse, and perform a play dedicated to the question of his daughter; her nature, her dreams and aspirations, the troubles and triumphs of her life, and her inevitable estrangement from her father.

Who Are You? – The Roles of the Players

The first thing to do is determine who everyone is. One person will be Shakespeare, and everyone else will be one of his friends.

Shakespeare's Role

The role of Shakespeare in the game is quite different from that of the other players. Most importantly, *Shakespeare will never be an actor in any of the scenes of the play*, even if those scenes include "Shakespeare" as a character. Instead, Shakespeare will define the initial circumstances of his and his daughter's estrangement, set the stage for each new scene in the play, and desperately pursue some sort of emotional closure concerning his daughter. Shakespeare must depend on the other players – on his friends – to see his vision through, and to reveal all the intricate emotional details of his and his daughter's interactions. In fact, this is his only hope: that his friends will somehow reveal something he, himself has overlooked.

The Roles Of His Friends

Shakespeare's friends have a very different job: they will consider, interpret, realize, and act out the individual scenes that the playwright has described – they will take on the true 'roles' of the play, standing in for the daughter, Shakespeare himself, and anyone else of importance who may appear in the various scenes.

The Questions

Once the group has decided who will take on the role of Shakespeare, and who will play Shakespeare's friends, everyone will take a few minutes to answer some questions about their new selves, and the situation at hand.

Shakespeare's Questions

Shakespeare's player will answer their questions first, reporting the answers to the group at large. This will establish some important details about the general situation of the play. Shakespeare's player starts by reading the questions privately, making notes and writing down answers – once they have answered all the questions to their satisfaction, they should share the results with the group.

🌀 What is your daughter's name?

Choose from the following list: Hermia, Rosalind, Juliet, Susanna, Cordelia, Portia, Judith, Viola, Miranda, Katherina, Beatrice. Or, if you prefer, make up another name.

🌀 How would you describe your daughter's nature?

Examples: truthful, reasonable, of noble bearing, chaste, free-spirited, romantic, loyal, wise beyond her years.

🌀 What did your daughter do? What action did she take that is at the root of your estrangement?

This action should appear at first glance to be incompatible with your daughter's nature.

🌀 How did you react, when she did that?

Perhaps you tried to be magnanimous, perhaps you shouted and railed and stormed about. Whatever you did, it didn't help.

🌀 Where is your daughter now? How do you feel about that?

Has she exiled herself, or had you exiled? Is she dying in a gutter somewhere? Eloped to Italy? Maybe you don't even know where she is – in that case, be sure to say so.

🌀 What secret ambition or hope did you have for your daughter, which her actions have now made impossible?

Unlike the answers to the other questions, do not tell your friends about this one – it's secret, after all. You never even told your daughter that you wished this for her, though you wished it with all your heart.

Shakespeare's Friends' Questions

Once Shakespeare has answered these questions and explained everything as best he can to the group, each of his friends answers their own set of questions. Some of these answers may be shared publicly, but most are kept private.

🌀 What special connection do or did you have to Shakespeare's daughter, that provides you with insight into her character and their estrangement?

Examples: a lover, a business partner, a childhood friend, a recent friend, a mentor, a rival, a servant, a pen pal.

If this relationship was known to most people who knew the daughter, then share it with the group. If not, keep it secret. If you are in doubt, share the information – the other players can determine for themselves if they would have known about it.

🌀 How has their estrangement affected this connection? How do you feel about that?

🌀 Is Shakespeare right about his daughter's nature, or is he deceived?

🌀 What does it mean to be a good friend? Is it better to console your friends, or to correct them in their errors? Is the suffering of a friend more important than your own?

Though these answers are kept private, consider making a note of them, so that you can refer back to them later. You may find that your answers change, as the game goes on.

🌀 How would you describe Shakespeare's nature? How did his nature lead to, or worsen, the falling out between him and his daughter?

Again, make a note of how you answered – you will almost certainly be playing Shakespeare in one of the upcoming scenes.

🌀 Do you have a daughter? Do you get along?

If not, maybe you are a daughter, or a son – certainly you are one or the other. Take a moment to think about what it would mean to be estranged from your father: how it might happen, where it would start, what unexpected shapes it might take. After all, that is what you are about to act out. That is what your friend is going through.

What Do You Do? – Gameplay

Now that everyone has a better idea of the general situation and their relationship to Shakespeare's daughter, the game can continue, and the play itself can begin.

From now on, the game will consist of the same general pattern: Shakespeare will decide what scene is to be played, describe it in broad terms, and then the rest of the players will divide up the scene's characters among themselves and act out the scene. Once the scene is done, Shakespeare will choose a new scene to play, or ask that the same scene – or another, previous scene – be replayed. This will continue until Shakespeare is satisfied, or his actors rebel.

A Note On Scenes

The most important thing for everyone to know about playing scenes in this game is this that you will be playing through individual scenes more than once. In most cases, you will be playing through a scene several times, and in theory the entire game could consist of playing the same scene dozens of times. As you repeat scenes, some *limits*

on what can and cannot be described in the scene will be lifted – and new limits will be established, in the form of *certainties*.

The First Scene

The play always begins with the same scene: the final confrontation between Shakespeare and his Daughter, which culminated in their current estrangement. Other than its necessity, it is identical to all other scenes.

Always Looking Backwards

Additional scenes must always be chronologically prior to the final confrontation – Shakespeare is not allowed to set a scene in the future, or in whatever time has elapsed between the confrontation and the present moment of the game.

Shakespeare can, however, create additional scenes out of chronological order; for example, he may decide to have the second scene be the occasion of his daughter's ninth birthday, and then set the third scene only a month before the final estrangement.

STARTING A NEW SCENE – SHAKESPEARE'S VERSION

The first time a scene is played is quite different from subsequent replays. The first version of a scene is essentially a monologue delivered by Shakespeare to his actors, in which he provides a limited outline of the scene.

Shakespeare's initial description of the scene must include, and be limited to, the following:

- ☞ Which characters are present.
- ☞ Where the scene is set.
- ☞ When the scene occurs. This will usually be stated in terms of the previous scene, or in terms of the first scene. *Eg. "Five years prior to our estrangement."*
- ☞ A general description of the action of the scene. *Eg. "This is the scene where I confront my daughter about her drug habit"; "In this scene, my daughter and her fiancé are arguing about money"; "My daughter and I are standing near her mother's grave, talking".*

Shakespeare will also provide the scene's first *certainty*: A Turn of Phrase. This is a short line of dialogue that must be spoken by a particular character at some point during the scene.

The details of the scene should be noted on a piece of paper or index card, along with the first *certainty*. Be sure to leave room for additional *certainties*, as there will likely be quite a few.

Shakespeare's description of the scene is immediately followed by the scene's second interpretation, in which the actors take on roles and play out the scene in a more theatrical fashion. Subsequent interpretations of the scene all follow the same structure.

PLAYING A SCENE - FURTHER INTERPRETATIONS

Once Shakespeare has established a scene, he may decide to return to it as many times as he likes. Every new attempt to play through a scene is an opportunity for the actors to reinterpret the playwright's intentions, the characters' motivations and action, and their own understanding of the underlying emotional drama involved. Each interpretation follows the same pattern:

1. Review scene details

If necessary, the actors should take a moment to remind themselves of Shakespeare's initial scene description, as well as any *certainties* that have been established about the scene.

2. Choose roles

Next, the actors should determine who is going to play which character in this interpretation of the scene. They can only choose from the characters Shakespeare has decided are present, but they are otherwise unconstrained in their choices: they do not need to play the same character from scene to scene, nor do they need to play the same character in a scene that they played in a previous interpretation.

3. Play the scene

Once roles have been chosen, the actors should describe and/or play out the scene to the best of their abilities. The interpretive authority of the actors is absolute: they should feel free to diverge from previous interpretations as radically or as subtly as they desire. They are, however, constrained in their expression by two things: *limits* and *certainties*.

PLAYING A SCENE - LIMITS

When a scene is first played, there are significant limits on what can be described by the actors; Shakespeare's initial description of the scene – technically, the first interpretation – demonstrates these limits. Subsequent interpretations remove these limits one by one, allowing the actors to slowly but surely explore the full intricacies of the scene at hand.

The limits in question, in the order of their removal, are:

- ☞ No first-person dialogue.
- ☞ No description of physical action or stage directions.
- ☞ No description or enactment of emotional states.
- ☞ No soliloquys.

The first limit – no first-person dialogue – is immediately removed following Shakespeare's monologue introducing the new scene. Consequently, the first time the actors play through the scene, they can describe dialogue in both the third person – “the Daughter talks about what she learned in school that day” – and the first person. “O Father, wondrous is this world of learned men! Today we studied birds, whose bones are hollow.”

The actors can not, however, describe actions taken by the character, external effects of the environment, or the emotional states of their characters. Not only that, they should avoid delivering their lines in obviously emotional ways, letting the words speak for themselves.

The next time the scene is played, the actors can describe physical actions taken by the characters. The time after that, they can begin to express the characters' emotions.

PLAYING A SCENE - SOLILOQUYS

The final *limit* to be lifted from a scene – on its fourth playthrough – is the limit on soliloquys. A soliloquy is a monologue delivered by a character directly to the audience: it is an opportunity for the actor to offer direct access to the character's inner thoughts, which are otherwise concealed. They are also the actors' only chance to speak directly to their friend, albeit in a character's voice.

Soliloquys are limited to one per interpretation (*not* one per scene), as well as one per actor per character (one actor may not deliver two soliloquys from The Daughter), and are further limited to the characters of Shakespeare and The Daughter.

When an actor wishes their character to deliver a soliloquy, they should simply turn away from the scene

and face Shakespeare directly – if this is not obvious enough, the player may have to do something else. Once the other actors are aware that a soliloquy is taking place, they should stop what they were doing and listen patiently and attentively.

Patience is important because delivering an extemporaneous Shakespearean soliloquy is, let's face it, a somewhat daunting task. As such, the player in question should be given some time to gather their wits about them, possibly take some notes, and just generally ensure that they are not feeling rushed. Once the soliloquy is complete, the actor should turn back to the scene, which continues from the point where it left off.

PLAYING A SCENE - CERTAINTIES

While *limits* tell the actors what they cannot describe during the scene, *certainties* tell them what they must describe. There are four types of *certainties*:

- ☞ Turn of Phrase: a specific phrase of dialogue, spoken by a particular character.
- ☞ Action: a specific action, taken by a particular character.
- ☞ Stage Direction: a specific external or environmental effect, including actions by incidental secondary characters.
- ☞ Emotional State: a specific emotional state, embodied by a particular character.

Certainties are elements that must be included in the scene, regardless of the desires of the actors. That character must always speak that particular line, or take that particular action, or feel that particular way *at some point in the scene*.

As play progresses and scenes accumulate more and more *certainties*, the actors' room for interpretation will narrow, but it will never vanish completely. Just because Shakespeare must be angry at some point in the scene does not mean he will be angry in the same way, or for the same reasons, or for the same length of time; and

who knows how many thousands of reasons there might be for the daughter to deliver that particular line?

Shakespeare, Audience of One

Certainties are Shakespeare's only direct input into the content of a scene. Shakespeare creates the first *certainty* for the scene during his initial interpretation, which is always a Turn of Phrase. The first certainty is unique in that it is composed in advance by the playwright: all subsequent certainties must be found within an existing interpretation.

To create additional certainties, Shakespeare simply waits until something happens in a scene that he likes, and then shouts out "Yes, that's how it is!" and makes a note of the *certainty*, including its type, on the scene description. Shakespeare can do this once per scene.

Optional Rule: Audience Members

In a larger group, it is likely that one or more actors will end up sitting out some scenes, due to a lack of characters to play. Shakespeare may allow these actors to create one additional *certainty*. Shakespeare may revoke this privilege as he sees fit, though he cannot veto a *certainty* once it has been created.

ENDING A SCENE, BEGINNING ANOTHER

It is up to Shakespeare when a particular interpretation of the scene is done. He should let the actors know that the scene is over.

Once a particular interpretation of a scene is complete, Shakespeare can decide to do one of four things: he can ask the actors to play the scene again, immediately; he can decide to go back to a previous scene and have the actors play it again; he can create a new scene for the actors to interpret; or he can decide that the play is done, and the game is over.

Ending the Game

There are two ways the game can end: either Shakespeare can decide that the play is done, or all of his actors can quit. In the former case, the playwright's player simply declares, at the end of a scene, that they have had enough. Shakespeare has either found the closure he was looking for, or the pain of confronting his daughter's ghost has become too much to bear – either way, his player should avoid explaining his decision to stop. [1]

Depending on how many people are playing the game, actors quitting may be a slightly more complicated process. Essentially, individual actors can reach the same conclusion as Shakespeare: that the play is complete

to their satisfaction, or that they can no longer handle this painful, pointless enterprise. Either way, the actor simply declares that they are no longer interested in participating – unlike Shakespeare, they should almost certainly explain their reasons for quitting, as well as their opinion about the current version of the play.

Of course, the show must go on – the loss of a single actor does not necessarily end the game, and further scenes can be played with the remaining cast. Only Shakespeare can unilaterally stop the play – though he cannot interpret new scenes without actors, only establish them.

[1] You have just read the first 3000 or so words of this document. The last two paragraphs are recommended, but can be safely ignored. All additional material past this point should be considered supplemental, to be read or not at your leisure.

Supplemental Material – Blah, Blah, Blah

Influences

This game is heavily influenced by the games of Jackson Tegu, most specifically his game *The Hydra*. In fact, the premise of this game can be traced back to a single session of *The Hydra* that I played at Go Play NW in 2009 with Michael Petersen. (If you are interested, here is the link: http://story-games.com/forums/comments.php?DiscussionID=9793&page=1#Item_10)

Ingredients

Daughter should be fairly obvious. *Nature* appears, in contrast to nurture, both as an explicit question regarding the daughter's actions and an implicit question regarding Shakespeare's parenting. As with the rest of the game the goal was to leave the validity and relevance of a person's 'nature' up for interpretation. The final ingredient, *exile*, was reimagined as estrangement, a particular form of social, economic and emotional exile. But not before it made me think of Cordelia, the titular Queen of France.

Variations – What's In A Name?

Naming the father-playwright Shakespeare is obviously something of a red herring – there is nothing about this game that requires Shakespeare to be a character in either level of the fiction, nor need an Elizabethan setting be assumed. Any father and any daughter, in any time period, would work just as well, provided all the players understood what was going on.

In fact, in the current version of the game there is no reason that a particularly ambitious set of actors could not decide to set different interpretations of a particular scene in completely different eras of history – as many modern directors are fond of doing with Shakespeare's actual plays – provided they maintain the relative chronology specified by Shakespeare's play when creating the scenes.

Variations – Table Talk

The current version of the game contains fairly explicit limits on how and when Shakespeare can communicate with the actors, and less-explicit limits on how the actors can communicate with each other. Groups may wish to experiment with allowing Shakespeare to comment between scenes – just be sure to place some formal limits on the communication (such as a time limit, or limiting communication to a single phrase, or allowing only yes/no responses to direct questions from the actors.) In any case, strict limits on Shakespeare's ability to tell the actors what he thinks are crucial to the game's themes.

As to the actors' communication with each other, the initial draft included a section after each interpretation in which the actors would be encouraged to discuss the scene, argue with each other over future interpretations, etc. In the end this seemed a little ham-handed. I expect that most groups of actors will naturally want to discuss the scene prior to a new interpretation; so long as this doesn't become too involved, it should be fine, but everyone should be encouraged to deliver as many of their opinions as possible by concretely demonstrating them in a particular scene.



My Daughter, the Queen of France - Scene Sheet



DESCRIPTION:

CHARACTERS:

LOCATION:

WHEN?:

LIMITS

No first-person dialogue.

No description of physical action or stage directions.

No description or enactment of emotional states.

No soliloquys.

Cross one limit off every time you play the scene, starting from the top.

CERTAINTIES

TYPE	DESCRIPTION



My Daughter, the Queen of France - Scene Sheet



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No first-person dialogue.

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CERTAINTIES

TYPE	DESCRIPTION





Shakespeare's Questions



Questions

Answers/Notes

What is your daughter's name?

Choose from the following list: Hermia, Rosalind, Juliet, Susanna, Cordelia, Portia, Judith, Viola, Miranda, Katherina, Beatrice. Or, if you prefer, make up another name.

How would you describe your daughter's nature?

Examples: of noble bearing, truthful, free-spirited, romantic, reasonable, chaste, loyal, wise beyond her years.

What did your daughter do? What action did she take that is at the root of your estrangement?

This action should appear at first glance to be incompatible with your daughter's nature.

How did you react, when she did that?

Perhaps you tried to be magnanimous, perhaps you shouted and railed and stormed about. Whatever you did, it didn't help.

Where is your daughter now? How do you feel about that?

Has she exiled herself, or had you exiled? Is she dying in a gutter somewhere? Eloped to Italy? Maybe you don't even know where she is – in that case, be sure to say so.

What secret ambition or hope did you have for your daughter, which her actions have now made impossible?

Unlike the answers to the other questions, do not tell your friends about this one – it's secret, after all. You never even told your daughter that you wished this for her, though you wished it with all your heart.



Shakespeare's Friends' Questions



Questions

Answers/Notes

What special connection do/did you have to Shakespeare's daughter, that provides you with insight into her character and her estrangement from her father?

Examples: a lover, a business partner, a childhood friend, a recent friend, a mentor, a rival, a servant, a pen pal.

If this relationship was known to most people who knew the daughter, then share it with the group. If not, keep it secret. If you are in doubt, share the information – the other players can determine for themselves if they would have known about it.

How has the estrangement affected this connection? How do you feel about that?

Is Shakespeare right about his daughter's nature, or is he deceived?

What does it mean to be a good friend? Is it better to console your friends, or to correct them in their errors? Is the suffering of a friend more important than your own?

Though these answers are kept private, consider making a note of them, so that you can refer back to them later. You may find that your answers change, as the game goes on.

How would you describe Shakespeare's nature? How did his nature lead to, or worsen, the falling out between him and his daughter?

Again, make a note of how you answered – you will almost certainly be playing Shakespeare in one of the upcoming scenes.

Do you have a daughter? Do you get along?

If not, maybe you are a daughter, or a son – certainly you are one or the other. Take a moment to think about what it would mean to be estranged from your father: how it might happen, where it would start, what unexpected shapes it might take. After all, that is what you are about to act out. That is what your friend is going through.