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# Cooper's Fathers and Daughters: The Dialectic of Paternity

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**Presented at the 6th Cooper Seminar, *James Fenimore Cooper: His Country and His Art* at the State University of New York College at Oneonta, July, 1986**

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AS *The Last of the Mohicans* begins, two parties leave Fort Edward for Fort William Henry: a detachment of reluctant and fearful soldiers takes the main route and a party of two brave daughters travel by "a path but little known." For six chapters we wonder why two females venture into a "bloody arena," until Cora finally satisfies our curiosity by making explicit what was implicit in Cooper's opening comparison:

"I may have been rash in pressing his [Munro's] consent in a moment of so much embarrassment, but I would have proved to him that however others might neglect him, in his strait, his children at least were faithful!"

"When he heard of your arrival at Edward," said Heyward, kindly, "there was a powerful struggle in his bosom between fear and love; though the latter, heightened, if possible, by so long a separation, quickly prevailed. 'It is the spirit of my noble minded Cora that leads them, Duncan,' he said, 'and I will not balk it. Would to God, that he who holds the honour of our royal master in his guardianship, would show but half her firmness.'"(61)

Both Cora and her father contrast her resolution to the army's incompetence. Whereas recognized leaders shirk responsibility "under the influence of their degraded fortunes," the spirited daughter proves her loyalty and love. In this seemingly incidental contrast between the domestic and the public domains, I find both a recurrent typology in Cooper's fiction and, more significantly, a prevailing drama between his fathers and daughters. Rarely do husbands and wives provide Cooper with sources of creative tension; he finds that tension instead in the father-daughter bond. And for good reason. Unlike a marriage between contemporaries, the relationship between father and daughter is generational and historical. Cooper's daughters

represent the future (or a possible future), and his fathers represent the past that is defeated or displaced.

There is surprising consistency in Cooper's depiction of this relationship, even with surrogate fathers or incompetent ones. Fathers and daughters love and respect one another, as did Cooper and his daughters. Yet however ideal the author's initial portrayal of the father-daughter bond, separation becomes inevitable as each declares with increasing clarity his or her allegiance to the past or the future. To portray the inevitability of this generational conflict, Cooper depicts both at transitional periods of life. The daughter, approaching adult commitments, asserts her individuality, and the father, at mid-life, reveals his weakness, the Achilles heel, if you will, in his assumption of power. Cooper's daughters rebel against patriarchal authority, albeit mildly, in part because fathers are somehow inadequate, a "motif" Nina Baym recognizes in the Leatherstocking tales (703), and in part because the daughters' moral codes differ. In direct contrast to her father's perspective, the heroine's is given authority, I would suggest, by its kinship to the heroic vision -- to Natty Bumppo's, Harvey Birch's, or noble Indians'. In narratives often structured around the reunion and separation of fathers and daughters, the resolute daughter achieves physical and psychological distance from her father, and in so doing recognizes an alternative vision which dialectically subsumes his. Kay S. House has noted that a heroines of the Leatherstocking tales often duplicate Natty's function as an "effective linking figure" because they can appreciate both whites and native Americans (44). I grant them even more significance because they ultimately serve as mediators between the social and the heroic. Although the telling of the tale partially preserves the doomed vision of the hero, Cooper further preserves it through the daughter who inherits both her father's estate and the hero's appreciative vision of nature. To demonstrate their importance in this cultural dialectic, I shall focus primarily on *The Pioneers* and other texts where the father is an empire builder -- novels like *Wyandotté*, the Effingham novels, *Satanstoe* and *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish*. In these novels that trace social upheaval, the daughter both endorses and denies the validity of her father's vision.

As we all know, Cooper's patriarchs strike impressive poses. Undoubtedly modeled on Cooper's own father, as Stephen Railton and others have argued, these patriarchs are unfailingly intelligent, benevolent, and, like Judge Temple, "full of activity and enterprise." Through metaphors, Cooper initially likens them to old world rulers, thus glorifying, justifying, and extending patriarchal dominance through historic parallels. He grants them an authority more broadly defined than their American endeavors would suggest, for these men are heirs of a tradition of unquestioned domination. Residing on a hill, Marmaduke Temple is Templeton's king or, in Richard Jones' lingo, the 'duke.' In the opening chapters of *Wyandotté*, Captain Willoughby is likened to Caesar and Napoleon. But it is the author, not the American patriarch, who draws these parallels -- after all, Willoughby refuses to claim his English title -- and in this fact we begin to see the tension, what Eric Sundquist terms the "anxiety," that characterizes Cooper's vision of patriarchal dominance. Imaginatively, the father's power is supreme, even unquestioned; historically, however, as a patriarch in a democracy, it must be questioned. As representative of a family heritage, the father is revered; as spokesman for the past he is challenged. We see the germ of this source of imaginative tension at the beginning of each novel when the patriarch makes a seemingly wise but potentially controversial decision. Judge Temple grants Natty hunting rights that conflict with his own laws. Although Saucy Nick grumbles when Captain Willoughby drains the beaver pond and builds his fort on the knoll, in so doing the Captain creates a seemingly idyllic and defensible dwelling. In *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish* Mark Heathcote forsakes the Eastern seaboard to carve out a wilderness retreat, a haven, or so he intends. Herman Mordaunt, the most significant patriarch in *Satanstoe*, resolves to lease, not sell the land in his tract, a decision that engenders later conflict. Decisive and powerful, the

patriarchs are committed to complete control of their realms. In the beginning of the novels, their domains seem unassailable.

Their paternal influence seems doubly impressive because the daughters are, more often than not, half-orphans, the father being the sole remaining parent. Yet he is never a tyrant. Neither repressing the daughter by ruling her nor suppressing her by encouraging feminine weakness, the fathers leave their mark in positive ways, as is seen in the daughters' independence of thought and action. Although Elizabeth Temple inherits from her mother a "form of exquisite proportions, rather full and rounded for her years," her "expression was her father's. Inert and composed, it was soft, benevolent, and attractive; but it could be roused, and that without much difficulty" (66). Judge Temple fosters his daughter's self-confidence. Although cautioning her about wilderness dangers, he does not tell her to remain home. He urges the initially reluctant Elizabeth to step into Natty's fragile boat: "I would have you above the idle fears of a silly girl. These canoes are the safest kind of boats, to those who have skill and steady nerves" (267). Similarly resolute when she sees Indians gather around the fort, Maud Willoughby summons her resolve by considering her father's model: "I will stay where I am," thought Maud, a little proudly, "and prove if I am not really the daughter of Hugh Willoughby, that I am not altogether unworthy of his love and care! I can even pass the night in the forest, at this warm season, without suffering" (150). And shortly thereafter, her brother confirms her self-image, "You are a soldier's daughter, Maud" (152). Similarly, Eve Effingham's self-confidence has been nurtured by her father, while her ready wit has been shaped by her surrogate father, the incisive John Effingham with whom she most often converses. Cooper's daughters fully acknowledge their fathers' positive influence -- more fully, perhaps, than could a son or an author -- and thus help establish the legitimacy of that father's control.

One additional characteristic testifies to the wisdom of the fathers' supremacy. Unlike many fathers, whether in fact or in fiction, they do not avoid but acknowledge their daughters' womanhood and emerging sexuality. Upon Elizabeth's return home, Judge Temple says: "My daughter has now grown to woman's estate, and is from this moment mistress of my house...it is proper, that all, who live with me, address her as Miss Temple" (106). When she goes for a walk, he smiles "with a father's fondness, at the display of womanly grace and beauty that his child presented" (285). Captain Willoughby calls Maud his pet and teases her about her beaux. Upon his arrival in America, Edward Effingham acknowledges Eve's womanly status by relieving her of onerous household duties, preferring that she enjoy her leisure time. Each grants his daughter independence by acknowledging her adult status, her sexuality. And herein we see another suggestion of the tension that, in the course of each novel, distances Cooper's fathers from his daughters; the patriarch rules, guides, and inspires the daughter, who must separate herself from him in order to achieve self-definition, to marry and thus fully discover her own sexuality.

At its best, the relationship between the strong father and the intelligent daughter functions because they love and respect each other -- and because daughters accept the role prescribed them by their sexuality. This domestic ideal mirrors Cooper's social ideal. Cooper's patriarchs have the virtues of Cooper's own father: "As a colonizer of frontier lands," James Beard says of the elder Cooper, "he devised policies calculated to enhance the self-respect and independence of his settlers" (L&J, I, xx). When the patriarch is accepted as the mentor, all enjoy happiness and prosperity. Moments of serenity in Cooper's novels -- the pastoral idylls that begin these patriarchal novels or the security felt by Cora Munro and Mabel Dunham when they reach their guardians' forts -- exist only when the leader's merit is recognized. It is significant, I believe, that none of Cooper's patriarchs vigorously challenges the authority he grew up with: Judge Temple keeps his secret in deference to Effingham's father and remains loyal to that friendship throughout his life. The theme of *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish* was

suggested to Cooper when an early reviewer noted the historical interest of "those sterner puritans, who did *not* rise in arms against their prince" (quoted in Davis vii). Herman Mordaunt wishes Anneke to marry a British aristocrat and remains loyal to the king. Although sympathizing with the American cause during the Revolutionary War, Captain Willoughby never openly declares his alliance to either side, preferring neutrality. And Mr. Effingham's bonds to America are clear when he returns to the paternal estate. Cooper can envision rebellion only in the politically dispossessed. The patriarchs respect authority and expect their own *earned* superiority to be equally valued by those they control.

There are, however, inherent contradictions in the lessons of Cooper's patriarchs, contradictions apparent in both the cultural and domestic spheres. Patriarchs nurture independence while circumscribing it. The fathers who encourage self-reliance also expect daughters to marry, subsequently to become mothers. Indeed, Cooper's fathers actively promote courtships. But as wives and mothers, these resolute heroines presumably must be as self-sacrificing as the undoubtedly admirable mothers that Cooper sketches. Although Cooper's fictional daughters never think of rejecting the role assigned them, the potential conflicts in their situation may be seen in the lives of similarly well-educated nineteenth-century women. Writing about women writers in nineteenth-century America, Mary Kelley writes:

As children of families committed to educating their children, the literary domestics were culturally advantaged. As females, they were culturally confused.... The more education these women received...the greater could be their sense of limitation and deprivation, of pointlessness and deep conflict. Eager to learn but increasingly aware that they faced a future restricted to the private sphere and a role as the enlightened, but subordinate companion...these women could not ignore the underlying question of whether they should be educated or, more accurately, whether they should educate themselves. (104, 77)

A similar conflict may be seen in an 1832 letter written by Cooper:

My girls are growing up around me, all that I could desire -- natural, simple, sincere, obedient and intelligent. They will soon be famous linguists especially Susan, who is already strong in four, and now attacks Latin and Spanish with great resolution.... she will soon be nineteen. I tell her she will get a better husband, by waiting three or four years, and she appears very philosophical about it. (L&J II, 176)

A linguist strong in six languages must nonetheless submit to the language of the patriarch. Cooper's socially advantaged fictional daughters face, if only implicitly, the same contradictory messages concerning independence and submission.

Cooper never fully explores this contradiction in the domestic sphere between nurtured independence and eventual subservience; we see few heroines when young and married. But the implied contradiction is fundamental, I believe, to his patriarchal model; daughters define themselves against patriarchs, establishing a dialectical relationship between them. While plots focus on the more significant resistance of the populace and marginal heroes to patriarchal control, daughters often simultaneously challenge their fathers' dictates. Herein lie the reasons for Cooper's depiction of the father-daughter, as opposed to the husband-wife relationship. For the generational conflict embraces an historical movement, as the father rigidly adheres to law and the daughter more flexibly recognizes an alternative vision. In short, however admirable, Cooper's fathers are always inadequate, and daughters identify their fathers' flaws -- in part through a contrasting set of values, in part by an open, albeit mild, defiance of their fathers'

authority. Although dutiful and loving by and large, the sensitive daughters respond with the flexibility of feeling, not with the rigidity of intellect, thus marking the limits of their fathers' perceptions. This intuitive appreciation of beauty and understanding of character aligns them with the sympathetic marginal heroes. Although the values of these natives are and must be lost as civilization encroaches on the wilderness, Cooper knew well the enormity of that sacrifice, and his ambiguity about the loss has been well documented. What has not been fully appreciated, I believe, is the way in which the daughters of the conquerors partially preserve, in their defiance of the father, the very perspective that seems lost.

Differences among the patriarchal, the popular, and the heroic visions are identified in their attitudes toward the landscape. Marginal heroes revere nature and live in harmony with it, often in a remote hut that seems a part of the landscape -- Natty's cabin, Harvey Birch's mountain retreat, Submission's secret hideaway. The populace destroys nature. And patriarchs see nature as a commodity. The greatest conflicts arise, of course, between the patriarchal and the heroic attitude toward the wilderness. And admirable daughters, although ultimately protecting their fathers' economic interests through marriage, share with native characters an aesthetic and moral appreciation of the wilderness, most notably in the Leatherstocking tales. Elizabeth Temple's sensitivity to the landscape is established in the opening pages of *The Pioneers*. She is "astonished" at the scenery, "unconsciously rejoic(es)" at the escape of the buck, is delighted with the "magical country," and is repeatedly drawn to the western horizon, where the valley is least populated. Much of the novel is related through her perspective, which is an appreciative vision of the wilderness around Templeton. Judge Temple's "philanthropic pleasure" in the scene is not hers. Although he often expresses the desire to preserve the resources of nature, his view, like Captain Willoughby's and Herman Mordaunt's, is fundamentally economic, while Elizabeth's is aesthetic and moral. One can certainly argue that the Judge's practical vision contains the real locus of power, for it has gained him the immense wealth which Elizabeth has the leisure to enjoy. But Cooper places great significance on Elizabeth's perspective by giving it more attention throughout the text. The dialectical relationship between father and daughter is initially a dialectic of sensibilities, each seeing and hearing and speaking differently.

Cooper further valorizes the perspective of the daughters by associating them with the heroes, the dispossessed and disenfranchised characters who are not fully heard or understood by the patriarchs. Significantly, Elizabeth alone hears Chingachgook's longest speech, as well as his own eulogy. Elizabeth responds to Leatherstocking's activities, perhaps best revealed in the second half through her sensitivity to the light associated with the hero. During the fishing scene, it is she who observes the contrasting qualities of Richard Jones' blazing fire and Leatherstocking's flickering beam, the beam that is subsequently spiritualized. When arrested "he stood, with the light glimmering around his thinly-covered head" (357) like a halo. When in jail, he asks that she meet him "on the very top of the Vision...just as the sun gets over our heads" (390), a benediction on the shared perspective of heroine and hero. She ascends to his domain, where he, not her father, can act as her savior. When Elizabeth and Effingham are trapped in the forest fire, Natty emerges from the burning forest like a torch, his clothing scorched and his hair burned. "Natty's resurrection trick," observes Richard Godden, "challenges Temple's paternity by calling into question his property in his daughter" (129). Indeed, the Judge's claims on Elizabeth are countered repeatedly, through Natty's ability to twice save her, through Elizabeth's sympathetic response to his perspective, and through her more direct involvement in his escape. She does thwart the law -- and her rather's judgment -- when she helps Effingham free the trapper from jail. Although her marriage proves that her primary loyalty is to her father's social position -- a loyalty never finally in doubt--, her appreciation of Leatherstocking's vision nonetheless preserves it, if only in our imaginations,

Through Elizabeth's eyes we last see him as he disappears behind a tree.

Throughout these novels about empire builders, indeed in many other novels by Cooper, we can find similar instances of the daughters' intellectual and intuitive distance from fathers. Often, Cooper validates their perspective by contrasting it favorably with the fathers' myopia. The mind of Eve Effingham, the best educated and most intellectual of these daughters, is contrasted to her father's "less active mind" (2~8). Maud Willoughby intuitively recognizes her stepfather's flaw, the carelessness that prevents him from hanging the gates that would fully protect the fortress. Whereas she trusts Saucy Nick and distrusts the traitorous Joel Strides, her father trusts Strides and foolishly distrusts the Indian during the crisis, reminding Nick of the lashes to his back. And as Maud's artwork shows, she, much like Elizabeth, appreciates the beauty of her surroundings and the nuances of the characters she sketches, whereas Captain Willoughby too readily sees nature and people as commodities. Cooper here defines the daughter's virtues as precisely those lacking in the patriarch. But perhaps the most striking example of the contrast between a patriarchal and a sympathetic perspective is found in Ruth Heathcote's marriage to the noble savage, Conanchet. In his 1833 preface to the British Bentley edition, Cooper wrote that his object was "to produce a familiar poem." That poetic quality is in part captured in Cooper's most abstract vision of patriarchal power, where the authority is shared by ascetic Mark who prays, the mysterious Submission who fights, and the worthy Content who loses his daughter to the Indians. And the gentle captive, Ruth/Narra-mattah is likewise his most symbolic daughter, for she, like Natty Bumppo, has two names and two loyalties. Cooper's awareness of the dynamic tensions between this father and daughter is best revealed in a contemplated revision of *The Wept of Wish-ton- Wish*, as recorded by Susan Cooper:

Some time after the publication of the book, when revising its pages for a new edition, the writer expressed a regret that his plan had not varied in one particular; the leading idea, the abduction of the daughter of the Puritan family and her adoption by the savages, would have remained the same, but instead of bringing Narra-mattah to her old home again with the Narragansett marauders, he would have carried the heart-stricken father into the wilderness on the trail of his lost child; at length, in some remote wigwam of the red man, he finds her as she is now drawn, a beautiful picture of sweet natural instincts, and wild grace, appearing one moment in that subdued forest light which belongs to the red man's daughter, and then again brightening under some clearer ray of her earlier Christian nurture (249-250).

Here, the father must directly confront a daughter whose perspective in part denies his own; indeed, she becomes the Indian's daughter.

The pattern I have examined is one of affirmation and separation, the kind of bifurcated vision that informs much of Cooper's work. In this patriarchal dialectic, the daughter's marriage suggests the possible synthesis, the compromise between the father's commitment to progressive economics and the daughter's alliance with intuition, nature, and native heroes. Although her father helps destroy the wilderness and must deny the natural man's authority, the capable daughter sympathetically responds and helps preserve the ancient -- and doomed -- perspective. But having said this, what kind of authority is Cooper really granting the heroine? One can argue that his heroines' moral superiority assures them only tutelary power, since it will be exercised in a domestic sphere. This is the sphere of influence assigned women by the nineteenth-century society, and Cooper's appreciation of women is, in the main, his culture's. But by contrasting the father's inadequacies with the daughter's strengths and by associating

her vision with the hero's, he lends greater authority to the feminine perspective. In her introduction to *Feminine Spirituality in America*, Amanda Porterfield observes that women who were denied political power "often made up for this in power they experienced in realms of religious experience and esthetic expression. A Marxist or a Freudian might interpret this feminine recourse as escapism or sublimation; a humanist would study the nature and meaning of its compensations" (9-10). I have attempted the latter. For a culture attuned to Romantic ideology, appreciation of nature suggests a finer tone, a greater responsiveness to God and hence to the values that ran counter to the commercial interests of the power structure. Cooper prioritizes the understanding of the heroine and dispossessed hero. Natty is an androgenous figure, both a killer and a man of fine sensibilities. His valor he bequeaths to the civilized males he helps mold into men; his sensitivity he bequeaths to Cooper's admirable daughters.

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