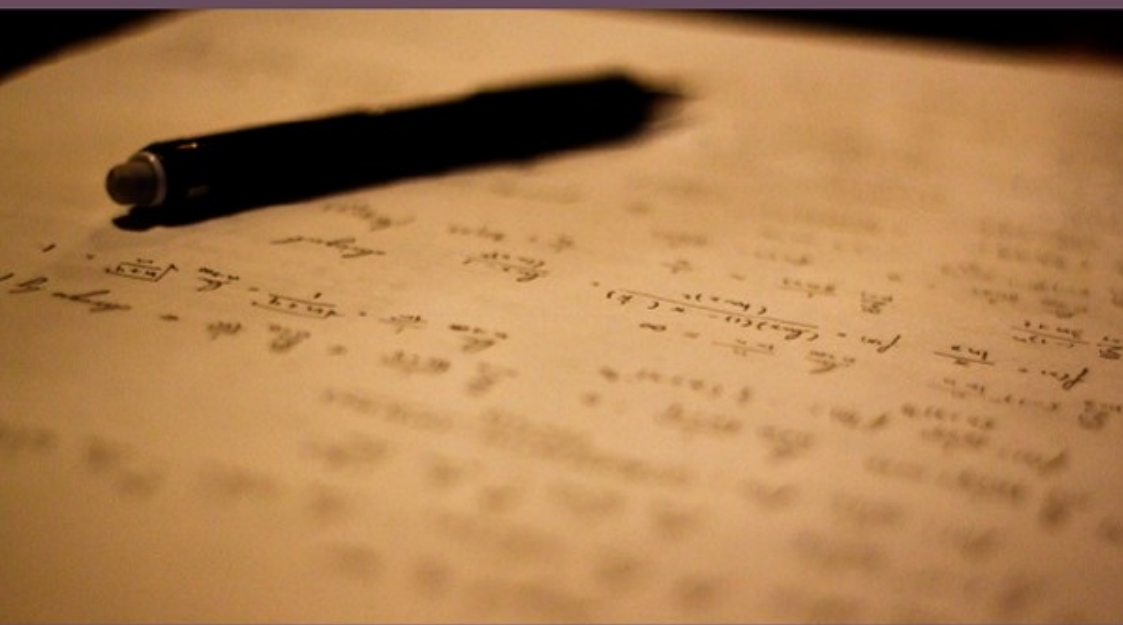


Psychoanalysis at the Theatre

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Proof

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David Auburn (1969-)

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The protagonist is a 25 year-old woman who, after the death of her mother at the age of 21, has dropped out of college to take care of her mentally ill father, a brilliant mathematician. The woman reveals considerable aptitude herself, but she has not been trained as a mathematician except by proximity to her father. She may have inherited his gift, and if so, then his mental illness as well. The play hinges on the question of whether she too is crazy and/or brilliant. The playwright explores the

overlap of brilliance, creativity, and madness by exploring the complex emotions of the main character and the dynamics of her family. Emphasis on family relationships gives the play its power and resonance. It raises the issue of inheritance of any kind of family trauma and begs the question whether any of us have control or selectivity in our identification with our parents.

The plot

In the opening scene on the dilapidated porch of the family's Chicago University house, the daughter Catherine, generally called Katie, a woman in her early twenties, is asleep, and is wakened by her father, Robert, who brings her a bottle of champagne to toast her 25th birthday and stops to have a pleasant conversation about their relationship and their shared interest in mathematics. The house is rundown. Robert's notebooks are stuffed everywhere. Katie is disheveled and drinking carelessly. Her hair is lank and her clothing baggy and unattractive. There is a sense of chaos in the house around her, signs of abundant output going nowhere. Katie is too depressed to cope with the sorting out that needs to be done. There is no sense of an incestuous relationship, and yet, she and her father form a domestic couple, a partnership in a life enlivened by their fascination for numbers and dogged by the tendency to instability that they share. Like him she has mathematical talent, even though she acts as if she doesn't have it and doesn't want it, any more than she wants to inherit his mental illness. Her devotion to him is total.

They are living a *folie á deux*. The first surprise of the play occurs when we are shown that her father is in fact dead, and then we realize that this is the eve of the funeral. She can't get organized, can't plan her future, can't contemplate leaving the house, even though it is clearly unsuitable for a young person living alone. Now the question arises: Is she drunk and hallucinating, is she talking to herself, to voices in her head, or is she reliving her memory of many times with her live father represented by her conversation with her late father as if he were still alive?

Her sister Claire on the other hand has stayed far away from the dysfunctional family. She is doing well as a currency analyst and living with a boyfriend in New York. She's efficient, confident, well-groomed, and attractive. Yet she seems stilted and unpleasant in the family setting, critical of her sister's isolation and mess. She makes normality seem quite unappealing. She arrives from her home in New York to get everything organized, and it is evident that her capacity for controlling anticipated eventualities is incredible. She even has a dress for her sister to wear to the funeral. The second surprise is that the dress fits and reveals how beautiful Katie is, and the third surprise is that Katie actually likes how she looks in the dress Claire chose for her.

Katie is putting up with the enthusiasm of a young professor, Hal who was mentored by her late father, and who is doing research on all the work

the father has left in his home-office at the time of his death. Hal enters the scene by waking Katie up, as her father had done earlier. This suggests that he is replacing her father in her mind and in her affections. When Katie is quoting from the biography of her heroine, a famous mathematician born in 1776, Hal suddenly kisses her, as if calling her from the 18th Century to the modern era. Hal extols her father's work as "streamlined, no wasted moves." It's hard to reconcile such precision with the mess of books the father has left behind. Hal is going through all the late father's notebooks looking for a brilliant proof. But none of them so far make any sense. The father's great gift has been eroded by mental illness and has now taken the form of writing codes for aliens. Still Hal persists. Katie becomes suspicious of his intense interest and accuses him of stealing a notebook from her. He denies it. She overreacts and calls the police. We are led to think that she is paranoid after all. Then we find out that indeed he has taken a book, because it has a message of gratitude and affection written by her father during a lucid moment, and he wanted to wrap it for her to give it to her for her 25th birthday. In the meantime, Hal is becoming interested in Katie. She warms to him and gives him the key to a drawer in which another notebook is hidden. Then comes the fourth big surprise of the play, at the end of Act 1. "Where did you find it?" he asks her. "I didn't find it, I wrote it!" Which raises the question: Did she or didn't she write it? Is she simply feeding off her father's legacy?

We know that after their mother's death, Katie, the younger daughter, has lived at home to take care of her father. In Act 2, we are transported to 4 years earlier to learn that after a period of in-home care by her, the father was much better and able to work creatively again. So he could have written the proof in those years. Reassured by his progress, Katie left for college, and her father quickly relapsed. She had to return home. Katie is like her father in her ability to think easily in mathematical terms. Her handwriting is identical to his. Now she is faced with the burden of proof that she in fact wrote the proof that looks like one of her father's. Claire gives Hal the book with the disputed proof in it. When hurt by the incredulity of Claire and Hal, Katie begins to withdraw and looks as if she might indeed become mentally ill. But a scene set 3 and 1/2 years earlier shows us that her father couldn't have written the proof.

Comments on the family dynamics

Katie is inclined to be antisocial and paranoid. She is certainly depressed, merged with a sick father, and disconnected from her peer group. She has come to need the support of living at home, even though it is a crazy place to be, and of being desperately needed by her father. She is an over-attached child who can't live on her own. She is aware of her instability, but she has not had a mental breakdown as her father has had. She lives in fear of total mental deterioration. The fear of something bad happening is a

reflection of a trauma that has already occurred. It seems likely that Katie has been traumatized by family breakdown in response to her father's symptoms and family anxiety predating the loss of her mother. It may be that her father was himself traumatized by events in his family we do not have information about the previous generation. She is afraid to be like him as a mathematician, in case that will propel her towards instability, and yet she must be equally afraid that if she rejects the identification she will end up like Claire, whom she doesn't like and whose preoccupation with the domestic matters of ordinary life are boring.

Katie has not had a mental breakdown, but she is symptomatic. She dropped out of college, sleeps away parts of days, lives in a filthy house, fails to stock the refrigerator, and spends a week in bed during the days after the funeral. She may not be a packrat herself but she has a great tolerance for her father's symptom of holding on to worthless notebooks. She lives in his filthy, deteriorating house, testament to a crumbling mental structure. She is socially withdrawn. She is vulnerable to emotional highs and lows and personal insecurities. She rejects concern and does not find herself loveable. Yet she is appealing.

There is a strong presumption that Katie is brilliant, but there is no conclusion about whether she has been mentally ill, as opposed to having been depressed by the strain of illness in the family and the grief of a recent

death. There is no definitive answer to whether she has inherited mental illness or has been affected by a dysfunctional environment. And there are good signs. She is well related to her father and they enjoy each other. When Claire comes home, she begins to look better. Even though she rejects many of Claire's attempts at mothering her, Katie is able to accept her offer of a dress in which to feel good about herself at the funeral. She can confront Claire with her angry feelings. When Hal kindly and thoughtfully gives her the loving message that he saved from her father, she is able to cry and express her grief and relief. She can relate to Hal intimately and as the play ends we have some hope that she may be able to sustain a relationship with him.

Claire is the autonomous child. Proficient in Math but not gifted like her father, she has felt less close to him than Katie has. She has been less privileged and less vulnerable to being identified with him. From a position of feeling rejected by him in comparison to Katie, Claire has become rejecting of the family. She moved far away from the family and is soon to be married. Living independently with a career and an intimate relationship, she has achieved the same developmental stage as her peers and is connected to reality and to the future. She has used her ordinary mathematical aptitude effectively to earn success in the financial world. Where Katie is symptomatic, she is super-normal. She has paid the bills to support her father and sister and to "keep him out of the nuthouse," but she has not been there for them emotionally. She feels regret and maybe some guilt that she was not

physically present to help her father as her sister was, but she has contributed in the only way she can. She comes across as inquisitive, emotionally cold, brittle, and domineering in contrast to her submissive, sloppy sister. Yet people are nice to her, we are told, because she is normal, while they are “assholes” to the more volatile Katie.

The character who is missing is their late mother. She has died and left them in this mess. Why did she die? What was their relationship like? How much was Katie’s return home from one semester of University a form of prolonged grief, identification with her father’s collapse, or a triumph over her mother whose place she now fills? What do the daughters feel about their mother? Is Claire like her? Is Katie like aspects of her mother? Claire and Katie are so different that this suggests the parents were quite different too, and complementary, each making the other whole. I wonder how much the deceased mother did during her lifetime to support her husband so that his creativity could survive the attacks on it from his thought disorder? If I try to imagine the woman who is their mother by combining the characters of the daughters, I see a competent manager, an attractive woman who subordinated her life to her husband’s career, and a woman who was furious at the emotional toll taken by her role as the guardian of the genius.

Was Katie’s writing of the proof an attempt to recapture closeness to her father who was retreating into illness? Katie gives the notebook with the

precious writing in it to Hal, after spending their first night together when she hardly knows him. She is eager for him to see it, the first person since her father to express both mathematical interest in her work and love for her. When he has found evidence in the fact that the proof uses techniques her father could not have known, he concludes that she did indeed write it. She is furious that he didn't trust her ability and credibility. She puts down the value of "proof." How anxious is she about outshining her father? Can she afford to triumph over his legacy?

When leaving at the end of the play to join Claire in New York, Katie is scared of being put in a mental hospital but she does not appear to be certifiable. Yet it seems that she is fated to live with her sister and her husband in their family home and repeat her failure to live independently as an adult, becoming as dependent on them as her father was on her. As for Claire, it is now "her turn" to look after a family member and protect against mental illness. Is Katie doomed to live out her father's life of madness? Perhaps not, because Katie has experienced Hal's interest and affection, and this may yet save her from repeating the family script. In the fifth and final scene of Act 2 where Hal agrees that it is Katie's proof and she then explains it to him, we see that there may be some hope of a relationship in which love and talent, intellect and emotion, can grow side by side.

The Structure of the play

Some comments on the structure of the play and the use of the number 4. Act 1 has 4 scenes and it introduces the 4 characters. The sisters are 4 years apart. Act 2 has 4 scenes that deal with the impact of the past and settle the matter: the father did not write the proof. There is symmetry here. Then there is a 5th and final scene that breaks the formula, and makes all the difference.

In the fifth and final scene, Hal agrees it is a brilliant proof, and his colleagues have verified his opinion. He thinks it is indeed Katie's proof, because it uses new techniques with which her father could not have been familiar and in short it is too "hip" to have been written by him. Katie is furious at Hal for needing to find evidence of that sort before he could believe that she wrote the proof. To her it was obvious because she knew she had written it and because her proof is awkward and lumpy, unlike her father's elegant proofs. He encourages her that sharing it will enable her to find the elegance she admires. The closing image of the play is of her beginning to explain it to him. Like her role model, the 18th Century mathematician, by having the respect of a man, she takes ownership of herself as a woman and a mathematician.

The lack of a 5th scene in Act 1 connects for me with the lack of the fifth character, the mother who is missing, hardly referred to, and her contribution to the family dynamic overlooked. In fact, her influence is erased. She has been killed off, perhaps drowned in the avalanche of her husband's

dependency or by feeling defeated by Katie's hold on his imagination. In this 5th and final scene, Catherine recovers the lost mother in her sense of self. To me this is a hopeful moment because it connects her father and mother in her mind and this is a more stable internal structure to support her brilliant intellect.

The notebook as dramatic focus

The notebook functions as a symbol saturated with meaning that shifts at different points in the play. It is an object that is transitional between the generations, and between male and female. At times it is highly valuable and at other times it is devalued. It has various qualities at different times, representing both the focus of the dramatic action and a symbol of the protagonist's search for a sense of self. We think of the self as built out of experience in the family group. Our perceptions and memories of these experiences are retained inside the self as pieces of psychic structure that are called objects. These objects are of infinite variety and they color how we feel about ourselves and our future and how we perceive others. We can see many of them displayed in personal interactions between the characters and in the interplay of scenes and flashbacks. We also see them especially clearly represented by the literal object of the notebook.

The notebook as internal object

The set is stuffed with notebooks, representing buried objects. Their profusion signifies creativity, manic energy, obsessive hoarding, and disintegration of the mind. Are they worthless, or might there be one book of worth among them? From among these many notebooks, one appears precious because it contains her father's thoughts about Catherine. This is a treasure, a precious object of attachment. Hal takes it home to wrap it for Catherine as a birthday surprise. Not knowing this, she nevertheless suspects him of stealing a book from her. She looks for it in his backpack and finds that he does not have a notebook after all. The object of her desire is absent. Then the book falls out of his jacket, an object of guilty possession. Hal reads to her lines her father had written about her in a moment of lucidity expressing his affection and gratitude. Catherine takes the book and weeps.

The notebook as the hidden, true self

After making this emotional connection to her father through Hal and after spending a night with him, Katie impulsively gives Hal the key to the drawer in which he will find a hidden book. She hopes that he will recognize her and help her to find herself in her work and in his appreciation. Hal misidentifies this book as having been written by her father, and the notebook becomes an abandoning object not a statement of self.

Attack on self and object of identification

When Hal is holding the book with the proof which Katie claims to have written but which he disputes, Katie in a rage at not being recognized tries to tear the pages out of the book. What does this mean? Does she want to destroy it because she is ashamed of pretending to write it, or because having the respect and appreciation of her talent from the man she loves is more important than the proof? Katie and Claire struggle for rights to the book, which Claire believes to have been written by their father, and the book is thrown to the floor. The notebook is now a rejected object spoiled by sibling rivalry and envy. Claire holds the book herself. Its contents are beyond her grasp, and she hates to feel that way. Now the book is an object of envy. Claire then gives the book to Hal and asks him to explain the proof to her, but he

can't do it either.

Object of disillusionment and de-investment

In a flashback scene, the father gives Katie his notebook with his latest proof in it. She reads it and we all realize sadly that it is rubbish. He couldn't have been the author of the proof in question. Back in the present, Hal brings back the notebook that Claire gave him. Admiringly, he holds up the notebook and offers it to Katie. She tells him he can keep it, do what he wants with it, pretend it's his own work, she doesn't care.

The loved object and the valued, social self

When Kate knows that Hal accepts that she is the author of the proof that fills its pages, she takes the notebook appreciatively. She opens the notebook, sits down, selects a few pages, and explains them to Hal, sitting side by side.

The notebook as a symbol

The notebook crystallizes the theme of the distinction between madness and brilliance in a tangible form that gets handed from one character to another. It represents the father-daughter connection and estrangement. To Katie the mathematical concepts in the notebook are familiar, puzzling and complex, but manageable whereas to Claire the notebook is threatening, a symbol of her inability to resonate with her father's brilliance or tolerate his peculiarity. The notebook and its brilliant contents signify the possibility of valued attachment to the father, which Katie and Claire fight over.

The notebook represents the true self of Katie hidden for many years in a mutually dependent relationship and in subordination to her father's superior intellect. She is highly identified with him, and it is in one of her father's notebooks that Katie has written her own proof and allowed his legacy to live. The notebook is the vehicle through which Katie reveals herself to Hal, gains his respect, and re-finds in him the love she felt for her father. Through the sharing of the contents of the notebook, she integrates herself as a mathematician and a woman.

Conclusion

There is no proof for the equation of genius and madness. Brilliance

does not equate with mental illness. Mathematics can illuminate life but it cannot address the complexity of human experience. Proof cannot ensure confidence in the self and its productions. That comes through appreciation, respect, trust, love, and reconciliation.