

Emblems of Paternity: Symbolic Objects in *Star Wars* and *Sir Degare*

Objects are consistently used to determine identity in medieval romances. A knight may not know his mother, lover, or father except by a common item. In *Sir Degare*, his father, the fairy knight, leaves him his pointless sword in order to enable Degare to find him when he comes of age. This object reveals Degare's parentage and gives him his identity. Even though it was made hundreds of years later, the medieval romance *Star Wars* shares this trait through the lightsaber, which reveals his father's identity as a Jedi knight. These objects fulfill similar roles; they develop identity through both the parent's ownership, creating a proprietary relationship, and through the means to create a unique, noble identity for the son. Both the lightsaber and the pointless sword enable the protagonists to identify their fathers and to attain their statuses as knights. These functions are shown in the texts through the first presentations of the objects and the revelations of identity at the end of the narratives.

After the mysterious fairy knight rapes Degare's mother, he gives her his sword—keeping the tip. It is his hope that the boy will one day seek him out “Tak him the swerd, and bidde him fonde / To sechen his fader in eche londe. / The swerd his god and avenaunt: / Lo, as I faugt with a geaunt, / I brak the point in his hed; / And sithen, when that he was ded” (*Sir Degare* lines 129-31). He gives a description of the blade in order to establish its reputation as a worthy weapon. Knights were largely associated with their swords, and the swords with deeds, so if the fairy knight uses the sword for great deeds and then passes it to his son, then the father's

reputation is past onto the son through the blade. The rhyme emphasizes the words “avenaunt” and “geaunt,” and when these words are paired together, they neatly show the worthiness of the blade. It is “fitting” because it has defeated a giant. The word “avenaunt” is significant not only because of the rhyme, but because the word “fitting” suggests that the sword is a suitable token, and a proper object to use for identification. The fairy knight’s skill with the blade is further emphasized by the rhyme “hed” and “ded.” It would be one thing to kill a giant by any means, he could have resorted to trickery or magic, being a fairy, but this draws attention to the manner of the death. It emphasizes combat and proves that his valor as a knight is more important to his character than being a magical creature. This is important in the context of the story because it reveals that his influence on Degare’s character will be largely knightly, without very much of the supernatural. This makes Degare a more “fitting” hero, which is further highlighted by the gift of the sword over another, perhaps more magical, object.

After the fairy knight in *Sir Degare* has established the inherent value of the object, he tells Degare’s mother why it is essential in this instance: “Yit paraventure time bith / That mi sone mete me with: / Be mi swerd I mai him kenne” (*Sir Degare* lines 129-31). These lines are the tail end of the fairy knight’s speech, and they speak to his hope that his son will find him and that he will know him by the sword. The desire for reunion can be seen in the rhyme “bith” with “with,” which underscores the importance of the object to the story and to the hero. The fairy knight says that he will know his son by his sword. This feeling of ownership, even after he gives the pointless weapon to the queen, speaks to the proprietary feelings he will have towards his son; he will acknowledge Degare because of the sword. The word “kenne” means “know,” accentuating the object’s important role, but it is also very close to the word “kin,” again drawing attention to Degare’s birth and the relationship with his father.

George Patterson Faust is, on the whole, highly critical of *Sir Degare*, but he acknowledges a couple of things that are important for this analysis. He calls the sword that the fairy knight gives to the king's daughter a token "He ravished her, and, as a token for the son she was to bear, gave her a broken sword, the point of which he kept in his pouch" (Faust 43). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word "token" can mean "Something that serves to indicate a fact, event, object, feeling, etc; a sign, a symbol." According to this definition, the broken sword serves as a symbol of Degare's future identity as a knight. A token can also be used as a sort of password, to pass a message between two people who don't know each other, or as evidence of a fact, or as a characteristic and distinguishing mark. The broken sword seems to fulfill all these definitions, because it is both an object with symbolic weight, and a means to create identity through combat.

The authority of Luke's father is similarly established in *Star Wars*. Obi Wan Kenobi takes Luke back to his home and gives him his father's sword and reveals his father's "true" identity. Luke believes that his father was a navigator on a spice freighter, but Obi Wan Kenobi reveals that they fought in the Clone Wars together, establishing both his credibility as a teacher of combat and his father's abilities as a Jedi knight. Obi Wan pulls the lightsaber out of a dark chest, while his face is in shadow, and then brings the lightsaber out into the light of the room. This reveals the object's symbolic light of rebellion in a world of darkness that the Empire has created. The object itself similarly creates a ray in the darkness because of the white-blue glow that it emits in the dark room. At this precise moment, C-3PO asks for permission to shut down while Obi Wan presents the lightsaber to Luke, and this gives them a private moment. It creates the atmosphere of an exclusive ceremony, further highlighting the importance of the object. Although Obi Wan does not reveal that Luke's father and Lord Vader are one and the same, the fact that he establishes Luke's father as a Jedi knight shows arguably the most important part of

his identity and leads Luke to his destiny. This is opposed to Degare's fate, which is to find his father and unite his father with his mother.

Towards the end of the romance, Degare's paternity is revealed through a joust with his father, the fairy knight. The two men break lances, and then charge towards each other on foot "And laiden on with swerdes clere. / The fader amerveiled wes / Whi his swerd was pointles, / And seide to his sone aflight, / 'Herkne to me a litel wight: / Where were thou boren, in what lond?" (*Sir Degare* lines 1047-52). The rhyme "amerveiled wes" and "pointles" shows the climax—the revelation of paternity. The gradual build up from line to line emphasizes this dramatic tension, and enhances the audience's expectation of the pinnacle of the story. This is the moment of awe that leads to reunion. The words "fader" and "sone" as descriptions for Degare and the fairy knight are very revealing because they bring attention to the relationship between them before it is officially acknowledged by the father. The last line of this section also connects to the beginning of the romance, where the fairy knight prophesied that his son would search for him far and wide. In this climactic moment, the sword's role is of the utmost importance.

The climax is one of Faust's interests in *Sir Degare*. He writes: "The outstanding characteristic of this type of story is the climax, the combat between a father and son who do not recognize each other" (45). This scene would be impossible without the sword, not only because it enables the combat between the two knights, but mainly because it makes the resolution possible. The sword serves as the primary, indeed the only, means that the two men have of identifying each other. Even though Faust does not specifically reference the weapon as the means of this climactic moment, it is central to this scene.

Jane Bliss disagrees with this assessment, asserting that it is not the sword but "the question 'where were you born' [that] cues a recognition scene" (Bliss 26), and she later repeats this argument in a footnote "Degare, whose father recognizes him as he speaks his name" (Bliss

150). She downplays the importance of the sword in this encounter, but it is the sword, and no other sign, that prompts the fairy knight to ask Degare about the circumstances of his birth. As such, it is the true catalyst for the scene. The rest is secondary, which we know because of the way that Degare's father questions him "aplight" or emphatically (*Sir Degare* 1050). The object's presence creates the tension and the urgency in the father's questioning.

The ultimate revelation of Luke's paternity in *Star Wars* is not revealed in *A New Hope*. The famous line "Luke, I am your father" is not revealed until the next movie, *The Empire Strikes Back*. However, seeds of this admission are planted in *A New Hope*. Towards the very end of the film, during the battle to destroy the Death Star, Vader acknowledges a possible connection to Luke. The music changes from charged battle music to a soft rendition of the main theme, heightening the focus on the words because the change signifies that something more profound than battle plans is going to follow. Luke hears Obi Wan Kenobi in his head, telling him to use the force. Luke is hesitant about switching off the computer and relying on his feelings. The scene switches to Vader's TIE fighter, interrupting Luke's struggle and adding tension to the moment. While the shot is on Vader, he says "The force is strong with this one." Then the camera angle changes, so that the viewer can see through Vader's cockpit windshield. The window is round, with an octagon in the middle, making it look like an eyeball. This directs the viewer again to Luke's ship, and adds emphasis to Vader's comment because we can immediately see whom he is talking about. The angle is from Vader's point of view, and suggests that now he is seeing this pilot in a new way. Although he does not know his son's identity until later, this comment shows that he is more likely to acknowledge Luke as his son because he already sees parts of himself (the good piloting and the ability to use the force) in the boy.

While I have chosen to only analyze a couple of scenes from each text that parallel one another, a further analysis of these texts would show an even deeper connection between Luke's

lightsaber and Degare's pointless sword. However, from just these scenes, a great deal can be discovered about the importance of these objects to the young knights. Not only do these weapons enable their journey into knighthood, but they also reveal their fathers' identity, which permits the young heroes to fulfill their destinies. These weapons are invaluable elements in the stories because they give the young knights information, tie them to nobility, and give them the ability to destroy their enemies. The weapons establish relationships between the generations, linking their combat skills with the circumstances of their birth, and increasing their status as noble warriors—as knights.

Works Cited

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