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Is the family a source of stability or instability?

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"Am I master here, or you? … God shall mend my soul!" (Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, 1.5.77-79)

In many of William Shakespeare's plays, family dynamics and the desire to preserve family image have a significant impact on the instigation of action in the plot. This is certainly the case for *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), *Hamlet* (1600) and *Henry IV Part I* (also 1600), where, through varied means, the audience sees the younger protagonists clash with older family members. Though the family unit emerges in Shakespeare's works both as a nurturing and a destructive entity, the influence that biological relationships have in these three texts on its members and on the wider political and social community is primarily a source of instability within the narrative framework. Moreover, in these three texts, due to the status of the protagonists, familial relationships often intersect closely with the intricate machinery of statecraft. Within this framework, the portrayal of the family as both a microcosm of societal order and a source of internal conflict becomes a focal point of analysis, exploring the ramifications of individual desires on the stability of the family and of the State. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the longstanding feud between the Capulets and the Montagues not only shapes the destiny of the titular characters but also reverberates through the streets of Verona, destabilising the social order and necessitating state intervention to restore peace. Similarly, in *Hamlet*, the familial dynamics within the Danish court are inextricably linked to the political machinations of power and authority. In *Henry IV Part I*, familial tensions intersect with the realm of statecraft as King Henry IV's fraught relationship with his son, Hal, epitomises the struggle between familial bonds and political allegiance. By examining the portrayal of familial relationships in these texts, this essay seeks to illustrate that familial dynamics shape and are shaped by the broader socio-political landscapes: where there is disunity in the family, there is disunity in the realm. Therefore, it is not necessarily that the family itself is a source of instability in these texts, but rather, it is the interaction between the independent self, the family and the State that serves as the primary source of conflict.

All three texts operate with a similar understanding of familial loyalty, dedication and duty. Lawrence Stone, in his discussion of *Romeo and Juliet* in *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (87), summarises succinctly:

> To an Elizabethan audience the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* … lay not so much in their ill-starred romance as in the way they brought destruction upon themselves by violating the norms of the society in which they lived …[this] meant *strict filial obedience and loyalty* to the traditional friendships and enmities of the lineage. An Elizabethan courtier would be familiar enough with the bewitching passion of love to feel some sympathy with the young couple, but he would see clearly enough *where duty lay*.[1]

What this quotation specifically highlights is the importance of duty to one's family within the context of Elizabethan England, which seemed to surpass all other allegiances. This constant necessity to preserve the reputation of the family also meant that "there were similarities between the position of servants in the household and that of children in the family … both owed obedience and service to the head of the household" (Blackstone 23). With this understanding of family loyalty and obligation in mind, it is therefore logical that the defiance of younger generations towards their elders within the family could incite instability, both internally and within the broader societal context.

This can be seen in *Romeo and Juliet* in the way in which Capulet communicates with both Juliet, his daughter, and Tybalt, his nephew, illustrating the importance of respect and blind obedience to familial elders in order to preserve peace. Much of the discourse between Capulet, in particular, and his younger family members establishes a power hierarchy which commands total devotion to the Capulet family, at risk of denouncement if challenged. "Am I master here, or you? … God shall mend my soul!" (1.5.77-79), Capulet remarks, after Tybalt

[1] All emphasis through italics are my own

attempts to confront Romeo at the party against his wishes, and when Juliet refuses to marry Paris, Capulet rejects her, lamenting that "we have a curse in having her" (3.5.168). Moreover, Capulet even labels Juliet as "mine", therefore justifying the match with Paris - "I'll give you to my friend" (3.5.191). This confused concept of parenthood as both ownership and guardianship means complete rejection when disobeyed, as illustrated through Capulet's threat that if Juliet "be not [mine]," she can "hang, beg, starve, die in the streets … what is mine shall never do thee good" (3.5.192-195). Particularly manifested through the actions of the Capulets, a binary of undying complete loyalty or opposition arises within family - there seems to be no room for intermediacy. Harold Bloom remarks on this rebellion against the older generation, identifying it as culturally progressive - "by focusing on the young, and not their fathers, *Romeo and Juliet* … depict and help[s] to bring about a moment of cultural change, when the older generation takes for granted the obligation of parents to arrange the marriages of their children, and the younger generation perceives this practice as oppressive" (Bloom 139). What Harold Bloom recognises, therefore, is that this filial uprising is sympathetic towards the younger generations. Shakespeare seems to invite the audience to question the accepted norm of familial duty as priority through the ultimate great tragedy, where "a pair of star-crossed lovers take their lives" (Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Prologue 6).

These examples of rebellion against familial duty ultimately culminate in Romeo and Juliet's relationship, despite being sworn enemies by familial allegiance - "my only love sprung from my only hate" (1.5.136). Their love for one another necessitates the choice to either stay loyal to their families and allegiances, or act out of their own individual inclinations. The motif of familial disloyalty emerges as a potent catalyst for the tragic events that ultimately unfold, as both lovers disregard familial authority and prioritise personal desire. Juliet makes her choice apparent when she remarks that "'Romeo is banished': to

speak that word/ is father, mother, Tybalt, Romeo, Juliet,/ all slain, all dead" (3.2.123-5) - her priority is with Romeo over familial loyalty, because "what's in a name?" (2.2.43). This is a direct rejection of her family, as illustrated through her wish that Romeo "deny thy father and refuse thy name/ or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love/ and I'll no longer be a Capulet" (2.2.33-35).

Moreover, the rebellion against family is not simply an internal conflict, but exudes throughout the whole of Verona, spreading social instability with it. The dispute between the Capulets and Montagues labels both families "rebellious subjects, enemies to peace" (1.1.72), and Prince Escales issues an ultimatum that "if you ever disturb our streets again/ Your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace" (1.1.87-88). The conflict takes casualties, too, with sympathetic characters such as Mercutio declaring "a plague o'both houses!" (3.1.97) on his deathbed. The impact that the familial disputes have on the wider society are illustrated here, once again showing that powerful families such as the Montagues and the Capulets, and the State, are two inherently mutually inclusive entities. In fact, the plot is as much spurred on by state intervention as it is by familial conflict, particularly when the Prince exiles Romeo, thus beginning the lovers miscommunication and ultimate suicides. All three texts explore the dramatic, if not catastrophically tragic, consequences of choosing individual aspirations over familial loyalties, questioning the destabilising effects on family dynamics and the wider community in the process. The influence of Romeo and Juliet's disregard for familial ties is felt not only within their own households but also resonates throughout the wider community of Verona.

Similarly, in *Henry IV Part I*, questions surrounding the stark dichotomy of support versus opposition within the realm of family loyalty are prominently raised, echoing themes explored in Romeo and Juliet. Throughout the play, Prince Hal grapples with the tension between his filial obligations to his father (and his royal lineage) and his personal inclinations

towards revelry and companionship with the likes of Sir John Falstaff. This conflict between familial duty and personal desires is epitomised in Hal's soliloquy in Act 1, Scene 2, where he articulates his intention to ultimately redeem himself in his father's eyes - he speaks of himself "like a bright metal on a sullen ground/ my reformation, glitt'ring o'er my fault/ shall show more goodly and attract more eyes/ than that which hath no foil to set it off" (1.2.219-223). Despite his ostensible disregard for the responsibilities of his royal station, Hal's underlying sense of loyalty and duty to his father and to the State becomes increasingly apparent as the play progresses, particularly at the volta in Act 3, Scene 2 where Hal promises "I shall hereafter … be more myself" (3.2.92-93). Whilst Hal's reference to "myself" could be interpreted as a decision to outwardly reveal the better parts of his individual character, "myself" could also be a reference to returning to Royal genealogy - to reflect in his actions in "the greatness of thy blood … [and] thy princely heart" (3.2.13) - in essence, to reflect the values of his family. His transformation from a wayward prince to a noble leader is exemplified by his valorous actions on and leading up to the battlefield at the Battle of Shrewsbury, where he "rise[s] from the grounds like feathered Mercury/ and vault[s] with such ease into his seat/ as if an angel dropped from the clouds" (4.1.110-113). This ultimate embrace of his role as heir to the throne signifies not only a fulfilment of his familial duty but also a commitment to the broader interests of the kingdom, underscoring the inseparable link between the fate of the family and the stability of the State. Peace, stability and narrative resolution are only possible, it seems, when both the State and the family are united. This is particularly exemplified through Hal's rescue of his father from Douglas at the Battle of Shrewsbury, where the stage directions state "The King being in danger, enter Prince of Wales". Having saved Henry IV's life, Hal fulfils his role as both son and Prince - his rescue of the King unites both familial and state duties. Resolution and stability are achieved when Henry claims "thou hast redeemed thy lost opinion/ And showed thou mak'st some tender of

my life/ In this fair rescue thou hast brought to me" (5.4.48-50). Jonathan Hart recognises that prior to this moment, Hal has been faced with a tension - "Hal must negotiate the estrangement from his father, who is also king. The family and the State are superimposed on each other while being estranged from each other" (Hart 75). Therefore, resolution is only acquired when Hal sacrifices his individual desires in preference for loyalty to both family and State.

By extension, it is not only that the State and family are united, but in actuality that the State takes precedence. Where Hart talks of a superimposition, Shakespeare employs Hamlet to investigate what happens when the superimposition of State over individual slips. The atypical familial dynamic presented in *Hamlet* reflects this idea, as Hamlet navigates the ultimate rebellion of familicide, his family lineage stained by "incestuous sheets" (1.2.162). Though there is an ostensible hierarchy of loyalties where family takes priority, *Hamlet* recognises that the State ultimately prevails. Nicola Woolff even claims that "the play becomes as much about a tragic family as it is about a tragic hero" (Woolff iv), and this is certainly the case when considering the complete erasure of both family lines at the end of the play, illustrating pertinently the victory of the State over the family. When asked by Claudius and Gertrude to stay in Denmark rather than fulfil "your intent/ in going back to school in Wittenberg", Claudius refers to Hamlet as "our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son" (1.2.116-121). By beginning with "courtier", Claudius exerts his new position as State leader, but also establishes what Hamlet should prioritise - state devotion, family, filial devotion, and then individual desire. This is particularly relevant due to Hamlet's sense of loyalty to his deceased father, signified through his statement that "a villain kills my father, and for that/ I, his sole son, do this same villain send/ to heaven" (3.3.81-83), so Claudius's reminder to swear allegiance to the State over family obligation does not go amiss. This concept is once again established early on in the play when Laertes seeks the King's approval to return to

France. Though Claudius asks “have you your father’s leave? What says Polonius?” (1.2.59), the significance lies in Laertes asking Claudius permission, rather than his father. The assumed air of familial permission is overshadowed entirely by the necessity of State approval, once again reestablishing the concept that instability is stemmed primarily from the clash between family and State, rather than family alone.

Continuing this idea, Laertes serves as a poignant example of the consequences of familial loyalty intertwined with political ambition. His steadfast allegiance to his family is manipulated by King Claudius to serve his own Machiavellian agenda, who asks Laertes “what would you undertake/ to show yourself indeed your father’s son/ more than in words?” (4.7.140-143). The alliance between Laertes and the State (as a result of his thirst for vengeance after the murder of Polonius) preys upon his familial devotion; Claudius invites him to “requite [Hamlet] for your father” (4.7.159). This not only exacerbates the familial strife within the Danish court but also contributes to the broader political instability. Claudius preys on the idea of familial submission to the State through his employment of Laertes, though the irony lies in his leveraging of the State to ultimately destroy the family. The culmination of this in the rigged fencing match (where Claudius cunningly boasts that “our son shall win”, 5.2.512) reflects the entanglement of personal vendettas and familial duty with state-sanctioned justice, further destabilising the already precarious balance of power. The manipulation of familial loyalty by the State for political gain underscores the pervasive influence of political machinations on familial dynamics, ultimately leading to a tragic cycle of betrayal and retribution that engulfs both the individual and the State in chaos, and wiping out both families altogether.

Harold Bloom stated in his essay on *Romeo and Juliet* that the text elucidated “the capacity of close-knit family for abusive relationships” (Bloom 140). Whilst internal conflicts within the family do have disastrous implications for both the members themselves and the

people around them, what Bloom fails to recognise is the impact of external influences such as the State on these relationships. In examining the portrayal of familial connections in *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet* and *Henry IV Part I*, it becomes evident that the dynamic interplay between the family and the State profoundly shapes the narrative trajectory of each play. Almost every familial relationship across all three texts is fraught with potentially catastrophic risk to the political realm, highlighting the instability of the interplay between the domestic and the political for these families. Through tragic measures such as conflicts, betrayals and reconciliations, Shakespeare illuminates the complexities of relationships and politics, demonstrating how familial dynamics are inexorably linked to the broader mechanisms of state governance.

However, a recurring theme emerges across these works: the dominance of the State over family. Despite the fervent desires, loyalties, and sacrifices of individual family members, the overwhelming force of political authority and reputation ultimately prevails. Whether through the suppression of familial autonomy, the manipulation of familial bonds for political gain, or the imposition of state-sanctioned justice, the State emerges as the ultimate arbiter of power and stability. Thus, in the world depicted by Shakespeare, there appears to be scant room for the sanctity of 'family' at all, as the imperatives of the State invariably overshadow and subsume familial allegiances, demanding the sacrifice of individual desire and choice. This is illustrated at its most powerful through the complete erasure of both families in *Hamlet*, with only Horatio left standing. In all three texts, the moral equilibrium of the family is completely disturbed by political exigencies; the demands of the State are total and its victory is complete. Conceptions of the State are borderline totalitarian in the way in which they completely eradicate individuality, morality and sanctity - as we see happen to the protagonists in all three texts. In this way, Shakespeare's exploration of the family reveals little about internal conflicts and much more about the

family's wider connection to the forces of political authority. In essence, the family in a domestic sense is entirely expunged by the political family.

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