Aspects of the Family in Later Shakespearean Tragedies

Aiko Kanayama

In Shakespearean comedies, discovery of one's own family or a new relationship, especially between a man and a woman, is a general thematic undercurrent. Such a discovery will bring happiness and very often lead to a marriage celebration. On the other hand, the loss of the family is the cause of sadness and hardship. In *Twelfth Night*, especially, the discovery of a lost brother is a key to solve the problem, and indeed his unexpected appearance plays the role of a *deus ex machina* at the end of the drama. However, the situation is considerably different in the tragedies. The family can be a key element around which the tragedy evolves and brings suffering and disaster to the protagonist. This paper attempts to analyse how Shakespeare depicts the family in his late tragedies where royal people or men of high state are the protagonists or play an important role. I would like to treat the family problem together with the issue of succession, and therefore I will mainly examine *Hamlet* (1600-1), *Macbeth* (1606), and *King Lear* (1605-6:Q, 1610:F1) in this paper.

Let us first briefly take up a late history play *Henry IV, Part 2* (1597-8) to see how the family might function for royal people. In *Henry IV, Part 1*, the king is worried about his son, Prince Harry, as he leads a delinquent life in the company of Falstaff and other knaves. At the very beginning of the play, the king expresses his envy for the Earl of Northumberland for having a courageous son like Hotspur. However, Prince Harry knows what he is doing and admits that he has been "a truant" to "chivalry" (*Henry IV, Part 1*, 5.1.94)[1] and promises to show his bravery in combat. Since other people in the court will not know of Harry's true intention, the king serves as a hoop to bind his family. The king, in his sick bed, calls his son Thomas, Duke of Clarence, and tells him to be on good terms with Harry once he dies.

King. He loves thee, and thou dost neglect him, Thomas.
Thou hast a better place in his affection
Than all thy brothers: cherish it, my boy,
And noble offices thou mayst effect
Of mediation, after I am dead,
Between his greatness and thy other brethren.

(*Henry IV, Part 2*, 4.4.21-6)[2]

Now he entrusts the role of "a hoop of gold to bind" (4.4.43) the brothers to one of his sons. Also in this speech, the king refers to Harry's virtues and flaws. This conversation between the king and Thomas serves to reveal that the family relationship is sound, the father perceiving which son can help Harry the best. Even when Harry jumps to the wrong conclusion that the king is dead seeing him motionless, the father does not reprove him much for his hastiness. In this way, we know that the father loves his delinquent son and that Harry will gain support from his brothers.

In the great tragedies written three to eight years after this history play, however, the situation is grimmer. The family is seriously ruptured. For Hamlet, the father is suddenly lost, and at the same time he feels deprived of his mother, not to mention the crown which was snatched from his hand by his uncle who married his mother. He thinks the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude incestuous according to Elizabethan judgment, if one marries his brother's wife, he commits incest.[3] Both Hamlet and the Ghost articulate this view, Hamlet saying so even before he meets the Ghost.

Hamlet. She married—O most wicked speed! To post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets! (1.2.156-7)

Ghost. If thou has nature in thee, bear it not,
Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
A couch for luxury and damned incest. (1.5.80-2)

The reference to 'the royal bed of Denmark' suggests that if the top of the great chain of being is accused of such rankness, the rank of man in the world order will be corrupted. Thus, Hamlet, the only heir to the throne, is

to fix "the time" that is "out of joint" (1.5.196) alone by murdering or causing the deaths of many other people around him. In this respect, Catherine Belsey argues that sometime violence and murder can be encouraged under the name of a filial affection, referring to the Ghost's speech above, "If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not."[4] Harold Jenkins, the Arden editor, also points to the scene where Hamlet braces himself up saying, "O, heart, lose not thy nature" (3.2.384) in his note of the same passage. Belsey thinks the delay of the revenge is due to Hamlet's questioning the righteousness of the Ghost's imperative.

> And Hamlet, caught up in the immediate intensity of filial propriety and family values, at the moment of the encounter disregards it too, accepting the spectral father's injunction as precisely *un*questionable. But his first anxiety recurs throughout the play, as the hero repeatedly reopens the 'question' of an injunction from the Ghost of a loving father who, apparently, commands an action which might incur his son's damnation.(160)

In Polonius' family, the wife is absent as is often the case in Shakespearean plays. Since her brother Laertes is studying abroad, Ophelia receives intense attention from her father. Compared with later heroines such as Desdemona and Cordelia, Ophelia is a passive character being very obedient to her father. She is indeed peculiar among Shakespearean heroines in that she gives up her love for Hamlet choosing filial duty instead. Heroines in comedies, such as Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, are more likely to disobey their fathers for love. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia is bound to the will of her father, but she complains about it. Though Olivia in *Twelfth Night* mourns for her father's and brother's deaths and makes a vow that she will shun the company of men for several years, she forgets about it once she sees Cesario. This kind of reaction may not seem so realistic, yet the Shakespearean stage is full of these heroines.

The character of Ophelia presents a contrast to them. Though she loves Hamlet, she returns his letters only because she was told to do so by her father, and also decides to return his gifts as well. A. C. Bradley defends Ophelia saying that "Ophelia is plainly quite young and inexperienced"[5] and

"On this childlike nature and on Ophelia's inexperience everything depends."[6] Bradley admits that "a large number of readers feel a kind of irritation against her,"[7] but according to him, it is so because she "was made a character who could not help Hamlet."[8] If she is so young and inexperienced, her speech to return gifts to Hamlet in the 'nunnery' scene sounds unfittingly experienced.

> *Ophelia.* Their perfume lost,
> Take these again; for to the noble mind
> Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind.
> (3.1.99-101)

In regard to her speech, Dover Wilson quotes Dowden that 'her little speech, "sententious" and "couched in rhyme, has an air of having been prepared."'[9] We can assume that her speech suggests Polonius' intervention, someone senile and nosy in Hamlet's view, and thus Hamlet starts trying Ophelia. Jenkins draws our attention to Laertes' speech to Ophelia on his departure to France telling her that Hamlet's love for her is something temporal and not permanent, and he compares such love to a violet whose perfume does not last so long.[10] Laertes's speech is delivered somewhat more poetically than Ophelia's proverbial words.

Polonius' instructions to Ophelia, Laertes, and Reynaldo have all served to impress his particular way of speech upon the audience, and Hamlet perceives it immediately in what Ophelia says. If Ophelia is as young and inexperienced as Bradley thinks, this speech sounds like something borrowed or put into her mouth. It has been argued whether or not Hamlet knows they are being watched, or if he does, from what point. It may not necessarily mean that he realizes that they are being observed by Polonius and the king. Still it can be said with certainty that he senses a very strong influence of her father on Ophelia.

It is different with Desdemona and Cordelia in *Othello and King Lear* who also have lost their mothers. When Desdemona is asked to whom she most "owe[s] obedience" (*Othello*, 1.3.179), she, without hesitation, chooses Othello over her father.

> *Desdemona.* . . . but here's my husband:
> And so much duty as my mother show'd
> To you, preferring you before her father,
> So much I challenge, that I may profess,
> Due to the Moor my lord. (1.3.185-9)[11]

The reference to her mother and the mother's father justifies Desdemona's attitude. In this way, the next generation can prosper. It is natural that any fathers feel the sadness of losing their daughters when they get married, except for Katherina's father in *The Taming of the Shrew*. But Brabantio's resentment and sorrow exceed the endurable level so that he finally dies of heart-break.

Cordelia is like Desdemona and politely rebukes her sisters for placing their father before their husbands.

> *Cordelia.* Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
> They love you all? Haply when I shall wed,
> That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
> Half my love with him, half my care and duty:
> Surely I shall never marry like my sisters,
> To love my father all. (*King Lear*, 1.1.98-103)[12]

Her speech here is first directed to her sisters whose marriages, as it turns out later, have already soured, and then implicitly to her father who is tyrannical enough to demand total love from his daughters even after they get married.

There must be some reason for such a demand though. Shakespeare is aware of the anxiety and the pain of ageing. By ageing, people lose not only physical strength but also their psychological hold on people. They are no longer efficient, powerful, and may not be attractive, and therefore, they start doubting if they are loved in the same way they used to by the people they love. In addition to the anxiety and sadness caused in this way, the old's flaws or disagreeable nature will be displayed more acutely. These symptoms of ageing are so universal that one is tempted to call them 'King Lear symptoms' or 'syndrome.' This tendency in the elderly can totally

change one's relationship with people surrounding them, even within their family. Goneril and Regan observe this tendency in their cool, realistic way.

> *Goneril.* You see how full of changes his age is; the observation we have made of it hath not been little: he always lov'd our sister most; and with what poor judgment he hath now cast her off appears too grossly.
> *Regan.* 'Tis the infirmity of his age; yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself.
> *Goneril.* The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash; then must we look from his age, to receive not alone the imperfections of long-engraffed condition, but therewithal the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them. (1.1.287-98)

The sisters correctly observe the process of ageing in their father, but they feel no sympathy for him and refuse even to pretend they love him. Goneril and Regan whose interest lies in the enlargement of their power and property, no longer show their affection to their father once they with their husbands each receive half of the country. At the same time, they start losing interest in their husbands, too, especially in case of Goneril whose husband is still alive when she sexually approaches Edmund.

The relationship of the couple is different in *Macbeth*, however. Although the play does not show the intensity of marital love as in *Othello*, the couple remain faithful to each other till their fate overtakes them. Othello's and Desdemona's destruction is engendered by themselves, but Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are destroyed by ambition triggered by the witches. *Macbeth* can be read as a story of a couple, a unit composed of two persons. Interestingly, this play is affluent in double images or dualism. As in the witches' first song, "fair is foul, and foul is fair" (1.1.11),[13] what we think to be two opposing qualities may actually belong to the same one thing. Upon seeing the witches, Macbeth says, "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (1.3.38) unwittingly echoing the witches' previous phrase. He also notices that the witches have beards though they should be women.

Minor characters use the dual imagery as well. Macbeth and Banquo are referred to as a pair in the captain's report to King Duncan.

Captain. If I say sooth, I must report they were
As cannons overcharg'd with double cracks;
So they
Doubly redoubled strokes upon the foe: (1.2.36-9, underline mine)

The witches' prophecy concerning the two is also ambivalent. Banquo is "Lesser than Macbeth, and greater," (1.3.65) and his posterity will be kings though he himself will not be one, while Macbeth will be a king but there is no mention of his posterity.

Now let us look at the relationship of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Lady Macbeth makes her first appearance reading a letter from her husband. The wife is informed of her husband's experiences in detail so that they can share them. Macbeth also hurries to tell his wife of the king's visit himself. Since Lady Macbeth knows the nature of her husband very well; "It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness, / To catch the nearest way" (1.5.17-8), she takes the initiative to do the bloody deed. In order to do so, she prays for spirits to "unsex" (1.5.41) her. The word "unsex" reminds us of the witches with beards and it ironically suggests that as a couple of men they are not going to have children. While, like a man, she is resolute to be merciless in her action, she spurs her gentle husband relentlessly to be manly and kill the good king. At her almost possessed drive for power, the husband winces.

Macbeth. Pr'ythee, peace.
I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more, is none.
Lady Macbeth. What beast was't
then,
That made you break this enterprise to me?
When you durst do it, then you were a man;
And, to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man. (1.7.45-51)

As we notice in this passage, a large part of their conversation is spoken in *antilabe*: the final line of the previous speaker is taken up by the second

speaker in the middle and the second speaker completes the pentameter.[14] Antilabe can be seen in many other characters' speeches. In this tragedy, most of the conversation between the couple is spoken in antilabe or stichomythia and it is certainly a noteworthy linguistic device showing how united they are. Moreover, Macbeth addresses his wife in loving terms, for example, "love" (3.2.29), "dear wife" (3.2.36) and "dearest chuck" (3.2.45). However, while Banquo calls Macduff "Dear Duff" (2.3.87), there is no such intimate address between Macbeth and other male figures, thus indicating that he has no true comrade.

On the other hand, the little conversation between Lady Macduff and her son serves as a foil to the relationship of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Upon hearing about her husband's flight, the lady concludes that Macduff does not love her and their little children. When her son asks if his father is a traitor, she confirms that he is. We can understand her disappointment, helplessness, and resentment at her runaway husband in this conversation. And yet we have to assume she does not understand her husband for Macduff's grief is enormous when he hears about the deaths of his dear ones. His thought keeps coming back to his children and wife while he listens to Rosse and Malcom.

> *Macduff.* My children too?
> *Rosse.* Wife, children, servants, all
> That could be found.
> *Macduff.* And I must be from thence!
> My wife kill'd too?
> *Rosse.* I have said. (4.3.211-3)

> *Macduff.* He has no children. — All my pretty ones?
> Did you say all? — O Hell-kite! — All?
> What, all my pretty chickens, and their dam,
> At one fell swoop? (4.3.216-9)

The meaning of "He has no children" has been interpreted variously. Furness introduces fifteen scholars' views, the majority of whom interpret "He" referring to Malcom rather than Macbeth.[15] Some of them refer to the

historical Macbeth who is supposed to have had a son. Bradley also supports the interpretation of the majority. [16] But I would like to take G. Wilson Knight's view quoted by Furness.

> One would imagine there could be no doubt of whom Macduff was thinking. Look at the whole course of the heart-stricken man's sorrow. He is first speechless; then he ejaculates 'my children too?' then 'my wife kill'd too?' And then, utterly insensible to the words addressed to him, 'He [Macbeth] has no children.—All my pretty ones?'— [17]

Macduff is not a person who immediately intends 'an-eye-for-an-eye' retribution, and at this moment he feels that childless Macbeth cannot feel the agony of losing his children. His thought keeps coming back to his children and wife so that he is not really listening to Malcom's consolation as he talks of vengeance.

Later Macbeth realizes that he killed King Duncan only to merit Banquo and his family.

> *Macbeth.* Upon my head they plac'd a fruitless crown,
> And put a barren sceptre in my gripe,
> Thence to be wrench'd with an unlineal hand,
> No son of mine succeeding. If't be so,
> For Banquo's issue have I fil'd my mind;
> For them the gracious Duncan have I murther'd; (3.1.60-5)

"Son" here does not necessarily mean that he has a son who is entitled to succeed the crown. If there were such a son, he could flee like Duncan's sons and Banquo's son to wait for the right time to claim the throne, but Shakespeare does not mention him. It will be possible to think that Hecate who is also the goddess of childbirth, tricked Macbeth by giving him no children to succeed him. By committing the bloody crime, he scooped up the sense of guilt and the pricks of conscience together with the crown, and ironically, what he gained cannot be inherited by his own children.

This double-edged aspect of his action also applies to his wife. Lady

Macbeth, no matter how strong she seems to be, reveals her frail frame of mind in her sleepwalking. It is very human to be so guilt ridden after committing so foul a crime. Therefore, the report of her death does not surprise Macbeth because he expected it. He knew the pain his wife was having since he also had the same pain. Being heirless, only "the way to dusty death" (5.5.23) is open to him and his wife. Thus, *Macbeth* focuses on the dualism represented in a couple though they are not always congruous.

The issue of inheritance is taken up again in *King Lear*. It was Hamlet who said that "Mother, for love of grace, / Lay not that flattering unction to your soul, / That not your trespass but my madness speaks. / It will but skin and film the ulcerous place, / Whiles rank and corruption, mining all within, / Infects unseen" (3.4.146-51). This is addressed to the queen alone, but in the larger scope, the kingdom of Denmark is also similarly infected.

The world revealed in *King Lear* is also ailing beneath its surface. Shakespeare deals not only with the microcosmic conflict: a conflict within a man, among a family, or in a kingdom, but also the macrocosm which seems to respond to the occurrences in the world of man. The opening dialogue between Kent and Gloucester shows that minute care has been taken to divide the kingdom between the sons-in-law, Duke of Albany and Duke of Cornwall. The fact that Lear cannot reflect his preference for Albany over Cornwall in the division of the kingdom shows that Lear, old as he is, tries to do his best to avoid any future discord between his sons-in-law. Moreover, he explicitly expresses his precaution to them.

> *Lear.* Our son of Cornwall,
> And you, our no less loving son of Albany,
> We have this hour a constant will to publish
> Our daughters' several dowers, that future strife
> May be prevented now. (1.1.40-4)

Yet something unexpected happens in the test of love where Cordelia, the most beloved of Lear's daughters, is disowned. It is the apocalyptic time when "there's son against father" and "father against child" (1.2.108-9) as superstitious Gloucester reads in the eclipses in the sun and the moon. Gloucester connects his personal worries with the unusual events in the

natural world.

> *Gloucester*. These late eclipses in the sun and the moon portend no good to us: though the wisdom of Nature can reason it thus and thus, yet Nature finds itself scourg'd by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide: in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond crack'd 'twixt son and father. (1.2.100-6)

'Nature' is a key word in this play. In *Hamlet* the Ghost of King Hamlet calls the murder by Claudius "most unnatural" (1.5.25), and as Belsey points out, he appeals to Hamlet's sentiment as a son to stand up for vengeance by waking his 'natural' feeling. In *King Lear*, the word 'nature' is used in many ways. It refers to the macrocosm, the goddess herself, the filial piety, some humane feelings, and also the illegitimate son is called a 'natural' son. It is this natural son that causes his father to be blinded and his half brother to be repelled for he does not respect the old values which the old generation takes for granted. Wilson Knight shows his insightful and elaborate discussion of the nature theme via a careful analysis of poetic symbolism and imagery in this play.[18]

Fathers and children are at war and so are old views and new ones. What is presented in this play is the difficulty which one faces with their own children. The father is not entitled to receive love and care he thinks he deserves from his children, and the son has to risk his life and comfort once he is suspected as rebellious against his father. The sex of the children or their station at birth has nothing to do with their filial affection. Daughters can be as ruthless and bring tears in their old father's eyes. A cunning illegitimate son outdoes a carefree legitimate son. It seems it is better to have no children at all as many fathers conclude when their children grow out of their control.

But for Lear having no children or having bad children can be a punishment, for he curses the womb of his daughter.

> *Lear*. Hear, Nature, hear! Dear Goddess, hear!
> Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend

To make this cruel creature fruitful!
Into her womb convey sterility!

. . . . .

. . . If she must teem,
Create her child of spleen, that it may live
And be a thwart disnatur'd torment to her! (1.4.273-81)

Since Regan is likely to receive the same curse later, once Cordelia is disowned, the fulfillment of such a curse means the end of his lineage, but Lear does not seem to care about it. He is too self-centred to think about the future of his kingdom. In fact, all his daughters die young leaving him no heir to succeed him. Even Albany who is closest to the throne declines to rule the kingdom.

But Lear finds something more important than an heir to succeed his throne through his sufferings. That is true love. Through his passionate rage that concurs with the storm in the natural world, through his humiliation, anxiety, tears, and madness, he learns to be patient and finally reaches a certain recognition.

Lear. I am a very foolish fond old man,
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more or less; (4.7.60-1)

Lear. Pray you now, forget and forgive: I am old and foolish.
(4.7.84)

He is no longer a king, yet Cordelia calls him "your Majesty" (4.7.44) and "your Highness" (4.7.83) and calls Britain "your own kingdom" (4.7.76). This is evidence for her love for her father. She tries to restore his dignity as a king. But for Lear, it is more important to die a father than a king.

Lear. And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no, no life!
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never! (5.3.304-7)

Lear's sorrow is bottomless here. The old father may seem frenzied at the death of his beloved one, but his figure holding the dead daughter in his arms emerges tall and grand. He is like the Pieta of Michelangelo in which the figure of Mary is disproportionately bigger than that of Christ.

King Lear shows that no pretense, no show or falsehood can continue to hide the festering wound within. The naked truth will be sooner or later revealed. Tom's nakedness and Lear's divestment symbolize the process of taking off the scab on the surface of the kingdom. Then after all the discord and sufferings are experienced, one will know who loves him best. Hamlet seeks who can and cannot be trusted and is almost trapped in his own psychological machinations. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are isolated in their search for the crown. Lear expresses a grim world view that "When we are born, we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools" (4.6.180-1), but his death is dignified when he loses everything. His sufferings make him like a hero in the Greek tragedy.

Shakespeare's later tragedies, whether or not they have heirs to succeed their kingship, reveal ailing families. The ailment is caused by the lack of trust, the deprived throne, the guilty conscience, or the anxiety of love. The playwright, however, analyses the pathology of the family and demythologizes the intactness and the sanctified unity of the family. In any age and in any family these kinds of ailment exist to a certain extent, and Shakespearean families suggest this. If we are to look at the society as a whole, the Jacobean audience may have turned their thought to the late queen who passed away heirless and the resulting anxiety in the society at that time. Having an heir is important. But these tragedies show something more important, something more essential about human nature. Because of their experience, the Jacobean audience must have learned that they can do without an heir. As Edgar succeeded the throne in *King Lear*, James I succeeded Elizabeth's kingdom in peace.

If we interpret these tragedies with contemporary concerns in mind, we find that the family has been sanctified in our society. Too much emphasis on the ideal family relationship will lead one to a sense of failure in building a family relationship. The idealism will at times prevent one from talking about their own family since there is a feeling of being obliged to hide the problems they are experiencing. These tragedies in which we see the great

figures suffer from the violence of their family are a force that frees us from our present concerns and worries. However, to find the reunion of estranged families, we need to wait for the late romances where ruthless violence in a family, such as abandonment of a child and banishment of a brother, will be finally redeemed.

Notes

1 William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part 1,* ed. A. R. Humphreys, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Routledge, 1994).
2 William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part 2,* ed. A. R. Humphreys, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Routledge, 1994).
3 Harold Jenkins comments "Incest formerly included the union of a woman with her husband's brother" in his note on *Hamlet* 1.2.157. See William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Routledge, 1995), 189.
4 See Catherine Belsey, *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden: The Construction of Family Values in Modern Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), especially 157-61.
5 A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1951), 161.
6 Ibid.
7 Bradley, 160.
8 Ibid.
9 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. John Dover Wilson, The New Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 193.
10 See Jenkins' note on *Hamlet* 3.1.99.
11 William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. M. R. Ridley, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Routledge, 1994).
12 William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. Kenneth Muir, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Routledge, 1994).
13 William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Routledge, 1994).
14 *Antilabe* is defined as "Division of line of verse between two or more speakers. As a rule this happens only at moments of excitement or for special effect." Andrew Brown, *A New Companion to Greek Tragedy* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), 37.
15 See William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Horace Howard Furness Jr., A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1963), 297-8.
16 See Bradley, 486-92.
17 Furness, 298.
18 See G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (London: Methuen, 1978), 177-206.