

Of Earls, Kings, and Dons:

Examining the Interplay between Individual and Collective Interests in Families

Amir Safavi, Columbia University

The family is the foundational social unit in which humans participate. While a family may have fewer constituents than other social units, such as nations, the family may be more complex, as personal boundaries are blurred by intimacy. The needs and values of individual family members come into conflict not only with each other, but also with the necessities and conventions of the family as a collective entity. Authors and artists have regularly examined the issues and values of their respective societies through the lens of the family dynamic and its associated tensions. In turn, the topics addressed by these authors have served as a lens through which audiences can better understand the complexity of the bonds that bind a family together. William Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Francis Ford Coppola's film adaptation of Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* are examples of such texts. Shakespeare's play addresses the dialectic between the natural and the unnatural, with regard to human nature and political legitimacy. Coppola's film sheds light on the immigrant experience in early twentieth century America, the tensions between old world traditions and those of the new country, and the underground Mafia culture of the United States. *King Lear* presents the Gloucester and Lear families, while *The Godfather* tells the story of the Corleone family. An analysis of these families suggests that personal interests cannot coexist with conflicting interests of the family. Competition between these interests destabilizes a family, forcing its members to face adverse consequences; only through individual compromise can the family survive.

The Gloucester family is destroyed as a result of the conflict between the desires of Edmund, the Earl's illegitimate son, and the will of the family, which is reinforced by the social conventions of the time. Edmund was born out of wedlock, the second son of Earl Gloucester and younger brother to Edgar. In a conversation with Kent, the Earl says, "I have a son, sir, by order of law, some year elder than this who yet is no dearer in my account..." (1.1.18-19). However much the Earl may love Edmund – as much as he loves Edgar, if not more – the Earl cannot recognize his illegitimate son as a full member of the family. The notion of the family is defined not only by blood ties, but also by the conventions of Britain in the Elizabethan era. Thus, Edmund cannot be an heir to either his father's title or his power. At the same time, Edmund's values are in stark contrast with the will of the family: "Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law / My services are bound. Wherefore should I / Stand in the plague of custom, and permit / The custody on nations to deprive me / ...why brand they us with base?" (1.2.1-10). Legitimacy, either as a result of bloodlines or of primogeniture, holds no meaning for Edmund. Edmund believes that power should be his because of natural right, by the value of his own merits, and he rejects the notion that this power should be assigned by unnatural, human-made conventions.

After setting his plot into motion and deceiving his brother and father, Edmund states, "Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit; / All with me's meet than I can fashion fit" (1.2.181-182). Edmund's cause can be sympathetic, as it reveals not only a personal ambition but also a need to be recognized for more than the value assigned to him by the world in which he lives. A reader may sense a moment of irony when Edmund exclaims: "Now, gods, stand up for bastards" (1.2.22), for Edmund circumvents social conventions and relies on his own initiative

to elevate his situation. The issues lies with what he must do to realize his vision. The obstacles Edmund must overcome are not just faceless social norms or impersonal authorities; he must overcome the familial bonds he has with his brother and father, going as far as deceiving his brother and leading his father to his death. His brutal and selfish actions instigate the destruction of his family and, ultimately, his own destruction. Edmund does not seek compromise between his own and his family's needs: Edmund wants his will to dominate.

Likewise, the Lear family is destroyed by the conflict between the needs of the individual and the needs of the collective. In this case, there are multiple personal agendas competing with each other, clouding any sense of a collective will or family unity. In the first scene of the play, the King distributes his land and power among his three daughters: Goneril, Regan and Cordelia: "... 'tis our fast intent / To shake all cares and business from our age, / Conferring them on younger strengths while we / Unburdened crawl toward death" (1.1.38-41). Lear passes on the responsibilities of leadership to his daughters, yet he wishes to maintain the respect and trappings of royalty, "[managing] those authorities / That he hath given away" according to Goneril (1.3.17-18). In confronting Goneril and Regan over their decision to strip him of his garrison of soldiers, Lear accuses them of showing disrespect to their father. Lear appears to muddle a familial obligation with a regal obligation that the daughters are no longer bound by since he has renounced the throne. In turn, Goneril and Regan begin to act only in their own best interests, driven by greedy ambition. They ruthlessly allow their father to wander into the storm and are driven to fight each other for personal gain, to the point where Goneril poisons Regan in order to gain the passion and political allegiance of Edmund.

Cordelia has no agenda per se, acting with honesty and serving as the model for purity by the end of the play. Nevertheless, the reader can still question the validity of her actions. While dividing his kingdom, King Lear challenges his daughters to declare which one of them loves him the most. Goneril and Regan joust with each other, excessively professing their love for their father. Cordelia, on the other hand, gives a sobering response: “Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth. I love your majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less” (1.1.91-93). In turn, the King disowns Cordelia. Should she have told a falsehood, feigning immeasurable love for her father, as a sign of respect for him and the conventions of the family? Clearly, much of the blame for the fallout between Lear and Cordelia lies with the King, for he values flattery from Goneril and Regan over true feelings from his youngest daughter. Eventually, the King realizes that Cordelia was offering the most sincere love, and Cordelia forgives him, strengthening the family, though much too late. Still, should Cordelia not have compromised her integrity for a more civic cause?

Ultimately, the entire Lear family – the King, Cordelia, Goneril and Regan – is destroyed. Each member of the family upholds his or her own personal values to the detriment of the collective; even Cordelia, with the best of intentions, is a factor in the destabilization of the family. The competition between their desires results in the Lear family lacking a sense of collective interest or familial will. Such a thing would require compromise from each member of the family: the King understanding that he cannot give power to his daughters and still command regal authority, Goneril and Regan appeasing their father’s wish despite the inconvenience, and Cordelia making an exception to her truthful integrity and granting her father a moment of flattery. Only with these compromises can a familial need be identified and

strived for. Without it, there is no cohesion among the family members. Without it, there is no family.

Likewise in *The Godfather*, the expression of personal desires nearly destroys the Corleone family. However, compromise ultimately saves and restores the integrity of this family. The Corleone family consists of both the family that the members belonged to by birth – their blood relatives – as well as the one they belong to by choice – the Mafia. In a meeting with Virgil Sollozzo, Vito Corleone, the patriarch of the family, expresses the will of the family by declining Sollozzo's offer to enter into the narcotics business. When Sollozzo assures Vito that the Corleone investment would be protected by the Tattaglia family, Sonny, Vito's heir, inadvertently reveals his thoughts: "Aw, you're telling me that the Tattaglias guarantee our investment?" (*The Godfather*). With the slip, Sonny reveals that there is division within the family in regard to the deal. Armed with this knowledge, Sollozzo plans to assassinate Vito in order to negotiate with Sonny to reach an agreement over the narcotics business. With Vito in the hospital, Sonny becomes the next Don Corleone and escalates a full scale war between the Five Families of New York. His actions are driven by personal desires for revenge and are not balanced by the needs of the family. Ultimately, Sonny puts the Corleone family on the brink of collapse. The family is saved by the corrective actions of Michael and Vito.

In the opening wedding scene of the movie, Kay asks Michael to explain to her how Vito assisted singer Johnny Fontaine with his career. Upon telling her the brutal story, Michael adds, "That's my family, Kay. It's not me" (*The Godfather*). Indeed, Michael goes to great lengths to distance himself from the Corleone crime organization and, as a result, his blood relatives. He attends an Ivy League school and, without his father's approval, fights in the Second World

War. Michael's values differ from those of the family, but are never in competition, as Michael is not considered a member of the crime family. The assassination attempt on Vito's life puts Michael in a position to re-examine his priorities. In a touching scene in the hospital, Michael talks to Vito at his bedside, assuring his father of his safety: "Just lie here, Pop. I'll take care of you now. I'm with you now. I'm with you" (*The Godfather*). He kisses his father's hand, conveying his respect, and embarks on the path to becoming his father's replacement.

The next day, Michael volunteers to assassinate Sollozzo and Captain McCluskey. In doing so, Michael sacrifices his personal values and integrity, is forced into exile, and leaves Kay. After Sonny's brutal execution, the grief-stricken Vito is forced back into action. He denies himself or his family any retribution for the death of his boy: "I want no inquiries made. I want no acts of vengeance. I want you to arrange a meeting, with the heads of the Five Families. This war stops now" (*The Godfather*). He forgoes an act of justice and personal retribution for the overarching benefit of the family, both blood-relatives and the organization. Furthermore, he agrees to the narcotics venture he firmly opposes, appeasing the heads of the Mafia organizations throughout the country in order to save his family. When his personal interests are in conflict with the interests of his family, Vito upholds his family and makes his own desires secondary. After the peace, Michael returns home from exile and is installed as the new Don. In order to stabilize the family, Michael must compromise his values; he can no longer distance himself from the interests of his family. He tells Kay: "I mean in five years, the Corleone Family is going to be completely legitimate. Trust me" (*The Godfather*). By installing Michael as the new Don, Vito also sacrifices his long time dream of Michael blossoming into a legitimate, respectable man in society:

I never, I never wanted this for you. I worked my whole life – I don't apologize, to take care of my family. And I refused to be a fool dancing on a string held by all those big shots. I don't apologize; that's my life. But I thought that when it was your time that – that you would be the one to hold the strings. This wasn't enough time, Michael; it wasn't enough time. (*The Godfather*)

Only by sacrificing personal desires can Michael and Vito maintain the Corleone family, both the blood-relations and the crime organization, and save it from destruction.

King Lear and *The Godfather* portray families in two completely different worlds.

Though the dynamics and participants in the Gloucester, Lear, and Corleone families are unique, it is clear that the expression of personal desires, without consideration for the desires of others or the needs of the collective, destabilizes each family and puts everyone at risk. One could argue that all families – happy or unhappy – resemble one another in this way, as they deal with the tension between the individual and the family group. By extension, the same could be said about society at large as though the family is a microcosm for the greater human collective. This tension is amplified as the world becomes increasingly open to individualism and personal liberties of sexuality, gender, race, and faith, while also moving toward the model of majority will in a democratic society. This reality should promote the search for the best state of compromise between the wants and needs of an individual and a collective. The difficulty arises from defining the limits for compromise, the point at which it goes against the very essence of an individual's identity to concede his or her desires. The struggle between the needs of the many and the needs of the few will always remain a hallmark of humanity.

Works Cited

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