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Families: An Introduction

Family – "that elaborate circuitry of passion and power" – is a topical and politically sensitive issue but at the same time one that has preoccupied and conditioned Western culture, in one form or another, for centuries.[1] The essays collected here were presented at the eighth biennial conference of the Swiss Association of University Teachers of English (SAUTE) on the theme of "families." As the plural in the title suggests, the focus of scholarly discussion was to be not only, or not mainly, on *the* family as a social institution and its current variants such as the hybrid family, the matrix family, the "patchwork family" (Bernstein 1990) or the "anti-family family" (Buchholz 1990).[2] Rather, the aim was to investigate the multifarious uses of "family" and related concepts (e.g. kinship or genealogy) in literature and criticism, as themes but also as metaphors, analogies or figures, as models for conceptualization which reproduce apparently natural structures of thought that might be seen to predetermine or preempt further questioning, or to conceal configurations of power, of relationships and influence. Such uses raise issues and implications (of parentage, origin, hierarchy, of bonds and boundaries) that call for renewed critical attention – if not deconstruction – on the part of linguists, literary and cultural critics and theorists alike.

Given this wide focus, the conference held at the University of Berne on 12-13 May 1995 united scholars from most Swiss Departments of English with varied interests in literature, linguistics and cultural studies. As usual, experts of international reputation were invited to give keynote lectures:

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[1] See, among others, Derek Brewer, *Symbolic Stories: Traditional Narratives of the Family Drama in English Literature* (Cambridge and Totowa, NJ: D.S. Brewer, 1980); Michael Ragussis, *Acts of Naming: The Family Plot in Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Bennett Simon, *Tragic Drama and the Family: Psychoanalytic Studies from Aeschylus to Beckett* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). The quote is from the blurb of Richard Gray's *The Life of William Faulkner* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

[2] Anne C. Bernstein, *Yours, Mine, and Ours: How Families Change When Remarried Parents Have a Child Together* (New York: Norton, 1990); Michael B. Buchholz, *Die unbewusste Familie: Psychoanalytische Studien zur Familie in der Moderne* (Berlin: Springer, 1990); cf. also *The New Role of Women: Family Formation in Modern Societies*, ed. Hans-Peter Blossfeld (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

these were Margaret J. M. Ezell (Texas A&M University), Werner Sollors (Harvard University), and Shoshana Blum-Kulka (Hebrew University of Jerusalem). Their contributions feature here along with a selection from the other papers read.

Margaret J. M. Ezell broaches a highly topical question, that of whether and how it is still possible nowadays to write literary history, a task which, among other things, calls for a thorough reconsideration of the canon and of periodization. In Ezell's view, the comparatively new discipline of family history is able to confront and challenge the methods of traditional literary history, in particular its display of a "control and certainty about the past [that] is generally obtained through the silencing, negating, dismissing or reconfiguring of any disparate voices and texts, [its] analytic posture which valued certainty, closure and linearity as the goals and means of explanation" (25-6). Hence, as Ezell argues, family history can offer interesting "alternatives to traditional literary historical methodology" (27), which has tended to "treat texts as frozen in a single historical position," as "a static and event-defined cultural product" rather than representing "the history of authorship and readership as dynamic processes" (35-6).

Genre theory, which has a crucial bearing on canon formation, has been particularly fond of using the family analogy. In her paper, Anna Hirsbrunner succeeds in "mak[ing] different ideologies of genre collide over the term of the family in order to bare their fraying edges" (50). It emerges from her discussion of such theories that "author, text and genre converge so that genres appear as all-male families" (44), often with two male "parental figures" (like Homer and Virgil, or Aristophanes and Plautus): "thus in retrospect, literary history appears as an instance of male bonding" (45).[3] Although feminists have challenged this traditional notion of literary family, they have "reproduced the structure on which it relied" by replacing the patriarchal with a matriarchal family analogy (46). Hirsbrunner concludes, therefore, that what is at issue are "ideologies of genre, which are only made acceptable by the use of the family" (49) as a naturalizing strategy.

Richard Waswo studies the impact of Annius's extremely successful and widely disseminated historiographic forgery, the *Antiquitates*, in which the kind of anxiety and tension inherent in the Western European founding legend's "obsession with cultural paternity finds [. . .] its clearest and most

[3] For an early English example, cf. John Dryden's throwaway remark, in his "Preface" to *Fables, Ancient and Modern*, that "we [i.e. poets] have our lineal descents and clans, as well as other families." John Dryden, *Selected Criticism*, eds. James Kinsley and George Parfitt (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 284.

extreme expression" (57). In this narrative, Noah becomes "the single source from which our entire culture is diffused" (56). As Waswo suggests, "Annius made it possible for Europeans to have it both ways: the Trojans are our ancestors, but their ancestors were ours, too; we're just one big family" (58). Through the agency of Annius and his sixteenth century popularizers, Western Europe succeeded in convincing itself of its unbroken lineal descent from the biblical patriarchs and thus contrives the impossible feat of combining, as it were, both anteriority and authority.

Paul Beekman Taylor's reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* emphasizes the "failure of family" and the "demise of dynasty," due to Gawain's lack of "essential hermeneutic skills" in reading intentions behind words (207). It is because Gawain can only read the lady's "verbal gestures and array as an invitation to adultery" (217) that he fails to understand "the full implications of his trial" (218) and thus becomes unwittingly involved in a natural and political pattern of succession; for, as Taylor maintains, in the testing of Gawain "lies both the mythic topos of investing an outsider with the power and occasion to regenerate a blood line and the topos of winning in a foreign land a life-engendering artifact for home" (221).

A comparable though also different case of disruption of genealogy and dynastic succession is figured in the incest riddle in the *Apollonius of Tyre* story, which Katrin Rupp examines in the versions of the Old English text, of Gower, and Shakespeare. The riddle not only plays havoc with the familial terminology but demonstrates that "generational order has gone awry." Since incest, as Rupp observes, "resists exogamy," the final outcome of this disruption can only be "infertility and death" (230).

A number of contributions focus on the representations and problematizations of family and familial values in specific literary texts. The importance of family values in American public discourse is highlighted in the two essays by John G. Blair and Hans Osterwalder devoted to American drama. Both also illustrate the topicality of the subject for American society.[4] Blair not only notes the striking interpretive differences in the contemporary renderings on film and video of American plays from Robert Anderson to Thornton Wilder but also probes the problematics of these for classroom work in a non-American context. He comes to the sobering

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[4] According to James Q. Wilson, "The Family Values Debate," *Commentary* (April 1993), rpt. in *American Studies Newsletter* 37 (September 1995): 21-29, the debate over family values in the U.S. has been strident: "On both sides people feel that it is the central battle in the culture war that now grips Americans (or at least American elites)" (27); and: "The family life that most Americans want is regarded by the eminences of the media and the academy as a cartoon life, fit only for ridicule and rejection" (29).

conclusion that with few exceptions these plays depict the American family as "a disaster" (124). Osterwalder gives a close reading of two modern classics of American family drama, *Death of a Salesman* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, in which he incidentally demonstrates the compatibility of psychoanalytic readings with allegorical ones. Exploring in particular the dynamics of partner relationships and their impact on the family unit, Osterwalder sees the plays as pretty devastating case-studies of patriarchal and matriarchal family structures respectively and comes to the conclusion that "in Albee it is a tyrannical father-figure, in Miller a domineering mother overshadowing the next generation and virtually annihilating the possibility of a happy family life" (115).

Henri Petter's essay on *Clarissa*, while obviously regarding the family as Richardson's meaningful unit of relationship, extends its scrutiny of the function of this social formation to include not only kinship but also friends who can lay some claim to familial relations with the heroine. Petter traces motifs of (in)subordination in Clarissa's family both as a nuclear unit and as an economic organism and shows how the heroine, increasingly at odds with her social environment, finally succumbs to the pressure of her family's firm endorsement of "parental, patriarchal, and male power, the honour of a newly-rich and ambitious 'house'" (73).

"Family" is of particular urgency and incisiveness where it clashes, or colludes with, race and gender. This issue is taken up by Werner Sollors and several other contributors. Sollors gives a trenchant as well as amusing account of how a popular American children's book about the wedding of a white and a black rabbit, Garth Williams' *The Rabbits' Wedding*, could become, in the American South in the late fifties, an object of controversy as it was perceived to offend against doctrines of racial purity. On the one hand, Sollors examines this phenomenon in the wider historical context of the often heated public debates about desegregation and alleged communist schemes to destabilize American society; on the other hand he draws some interesting theoretical inferences about the rules that govern processes of "theming," and about the contexts that "ultimately confer plausibility to what will be considered the themes of a given work" (145).

Saba Bahar investigates the impact of the family politics of Mary Shelley's parents on her own representations, in *Frankenstein*, of ideas of family, womanhood and motherhood. She tries to show in particular the divergent positions of William Godwin, Thomas Malthus and Mary Wollstonecraft and their involvement in the public debate about population politics, and argues on the basis of Frankenstein's own references to

monstrous races that Shelley's family politics ought to be contextualized by means of the racist discourse of British imperialist politics.

Neil Forsyth and Martine Hennard highlight Salman Rushdie's deconstruction of "family" in *Midnight's Children*. They see the doubling of the family motif (in both private and public life) as the "generating matrix for the whole text," with the narrator at once the son of a (racially mixed) couple and "the doomed offspring of Father History and Mother India" (198). Rushdie can thus be said to attack "the naturalized entities of nation, history, and identity through a subversive treatment of our familiar familial system" (199), of the "ideas of blood and family upon which the larger structures of class and nation are built" (199). Like Rushdie's narrator, finally, the "'national' family has to accept its heterogeneous, composite and hybrid nature and history" (204).

In an overview of postmodern African American fiction, Fritz Gysin shows how authors like John Edgar Wideman, Gayl Jones, or Charles Johnson, have dealt with the predicament that their search for pedigree and genealogical foundation more often than not reveals "scandalous roots:" a mixed racial ancestry. This "discovery" typically leads to re-readings of the foundation story against the grain, and Gysin offers the tentative conclusion that these writers, in a variety of ways, tend to "replac[e] the myth of the liberating African with a parody of the fall" (175).

Therese Steffen argues that Rita Dove's poem sequence *Thomas and Beulah* counteracts the widespread fictional stereotype of black American family disruption. In her work Dove makes the recorded past "the object of reinterpretation and reconstruction" (192) in a rather different manner. Drawing on her own family history, Dove historicizes from a marginal position what might have been a purely lyric sequence of poems of love and marriage. "The narrative poems string imaginative moments of history like beads on a necklace" (182), creating links between private and public events. Thus contextualized, the sequence is seen to be unified by a specific location, Akron, Ohio, which the text "develops into a complex artistic symbol" (190). The fact that the life history of this couple is marked by a "communion devoid of suspense, passion, rape, murder or incest" (190) makes *Thomas and Beulah* read like a powerful and deliberate counterpoint to the postmodern fiction examined by Gysin.

From both a linguistic and an ethnic perspective Shoshana Blum-Kulka undertakes a comparative study of cultural patterns in the dinner conversations of Jewish-American and Israeli families, opening up a fascinating perspective on the modes and constraints operating in the

cultural variations of ways of speaking. By means of a close analysis of a particular type of speech event, the talk at family dinner, she attempts to trace the process by which "families negotiate familial, social and cultural identities" (105). She demonstrates both "the degree of diversity in interactional styles" among Jewish communities sharing a common (Eastern European) background and the varied functions of "pragmatic socialization" (77). As her study reveals, "it is in these discourse socialization domains that the groups studied show unique cultural patterns" (80). Another interesting result is the insight that "Jewish-American and Israeli families seem to differ in the boundaries they draw between the private and the public spheres and the gender roles assigned to each" (89).

A broadly psychological approach informs the essays of Toni O'Brien Johnson, Adam Piette and Evelyne Ender. Drawing mainly on the work of the "object relations" school of psychology, Toni O'Brien Johnson discusses Samuel Beckett's striking emphasis on the disturbed, curtailed familial relationships of his dramatic characters, on their solipsism that culminates in the total failure of relatedness in his late plays. Johnson surmises that this "disturbance of the capacity for attachment, and the development of separation anxiety [which] can be seen in Beckett's characters" (241) may have its origin in the playwright's own biography, his struggle with the archetype of the "Terrible Mother." Rudimentary memories, liminal traces of family relationships surface in the characters' discourse, while these family members never appear on stage themselves, and language itself more and more substitutes "for the absent Other (in [Beckett's] case, the Terrible Mother)" (245).

Adam Piette focuses on Joyce's exploration of the possibility of a memory system shared by family members. *Finnegans Wake* is shown to bring the individuals' private repressed memories, or the unconscious, to the surface, into a "familial textual memory" (250), by means of its "shamebred music," i.e. its slips of the tongue, puns etc., thus creating a "family complex of forbidden male desire inscribed within a patriarchal familial memory system" (252).

Evelyne Ender takes a close look at the mother-daughter bond in the writing of Virginia Woolf, though without trying to cast Julia Stephen either as archetype or stereotype mother.[5] She traces the complex and acutely painful processes by which the author managed, through the "compensatory work" of writing (256), to deal with the traumatic loss of her mother, "to

[5] For examples, see Marjorie McCormick, *Mothers in the English Novel: From Stereotype to Archetype* (New York: Garland, 1991).

retrace the line going back to her mother so as to reinvent her presence" (259), an effort that culminates in the representation of Lily Briscoe's successful completion of her painting. As Ender argues, Woolf develops for this her own private symbolic language to mark the "maternal filiation" (263) of her creative work, which thus "bear[s] witness to the unique significance of the mother-daughter bond" (268).

The essays collected in *Families* not only demonstrate that this naturalized entity, "family," can be fruitfully approached from many directions, but they testify, at the same time, to the multiplicity of "families," the enduring vitality, usefulness and currency of this trope through all the historical transformations of its referent, and hence the need for its continued interrogation.

Berne, March 1996 Werner Senn