

***Unacknowledged Matricide in T. S. Eliot's The Family Reunion***

Ken Chang, National Cheng-Chi University, Taiwan

The Asian Conference on Literature & Librarianship 2014  
Official Conference Proceedings 2014

0198

Commenting on his *The Family Reunion* in 'Poetry and Drama,' T.S. Eliot admits two serious problems he had not solved properly: the Furies and the disruptive perspective of the play (30). He complains that the Furies never succeed in being either Greek goddesses or modern spooks and the audience cannot decide whether to see this drama as a tragedy of the mother or the salvation of the son. After Eliot revealed he had modeled *The Family Reunion* on Aeschylus's *The Oresteia*, many critics focus on drawing parallels and fussing about the correspondent characters in each plays. Although Grover Smith provides explanation of Eumenides as ghosts personifying Harry's animosity toward both his mother and his wife, he does not pursue further to theorize the theme of matricide. Martha C. Carpentier seems to delve deeper into matricide, but she concluded that the resolved matricide as a transition from paganism to Christianity. In her dealing with matricide, Martha C. Carpentier dispenses with Amy (mother) to see the play as the salvation of Harry (son). Matricide has not been adequately explored in comparison with patricide, and I want to employ Melanie Klein's object relations theory to probe into this theme and accommodate two problems Eliot encountered. Klein's theory offers a way to simultaneously take Amy and Harry into account without exclusion, and Eliot's unsatisfactory Furies can be seen as embodiment of Harry's mentality. By accommodating Eliot's problems with Kleinian approach, I hope this essay can bring new light on Eliot's *The Family Reunion* and matricide.

Before proceeding to investigate the relation between Amy and Harry, I think we need to ponder on what kind of mother Amy is, who makes Harry would rather wander around the world ten years than stay at home with her. Mary and Harry's memory about the hollow tree may shed light on Amy's maternity:

MARY. The hollow tree in what we called the wilderness

HARRY. Down near the river. That was the block house

From which we fought the Indians. Arthur and John.

.....

MARY. They never found the secret.

HARRY. Not then. But later, coming back from school

for the holidays, after the formal reception

And the family festivities, I made my escape

As soon as I could, and slipped down to the river

To find the old hiding place. The wilderness was gone,

The tree had been felled, and a neat summer-house

Had been erected, 'to please the children.'

It's absurd that one's only memory of freedom

Should be a hollow tree in a wood by the river. (52-53)

A hollow tree is the only retreat providing Mary and Harry with the respite from the family pressure, but Amy tyrannically roots out the tree and establishes another neat summer-house as the manifestation of her all-encompassing control. Forfeiting their pleasant retreat, Amy inhibits them from freely accessing gratification. Amy's act may arouse their stored-up anxiety of deprivation experienced at the first time as weaning. From Klein's point of view, babies react to unpleasant stimuli and the frustration of their pleasure with feelings of hatred and aggression (*Love, Guilt and Reparation* 290).<sup>1</sup> Babies' sadistic impulses against mother's body not only incur the sense of guilt but also the fear of mother's retribution. In babies' fantasies, the hurt mother turns into the persecutor who threatens to dismember and devour babies (LGR 254). At the apex of their persecutory anxiety, babies turn to the father for

protection. In *The Family Reunion*, the absence of the father figure aggravates this anxiety of being persecuted by the mother. Devoid of the father's protection may result in Harry's wandering, and the absent father may also prompt his insistence on probing into the mystery of his family. For Harry, returning to the Wishwood is being exposed once again to the threat of being in the possession of Amy, because Agatha cogently points out that Amy is identified with the house (101). In welcoming Harry's return, Amy heartily proclaims that nothing has been changed (25). Refusing to let go anything in her grip, Amy is the mother who desires to possess her children and keep them dependent on her.

Faced with intimidating threat, Harry nevertheless chooses to return home. I think he wants not only to investigate the mystery of his family but also to attempt reparation with his mother. Melanie Klein considers that the experiences of suffering, depression and guilt, linked with the greater love for the object, stir up the urge to make reparation (Envy and Gratitude 279).<sup>2</sup> On his returning home, Harry insists on proclaiming that he pushed his wife off the deck into the sea. About Harry's wife, the only available information is from Amy's description:

She never would have been one of the family,  
She never wished to be one of the family,  
She only wanted to keep him to herself  
To satisfy her vanity. That's why she dragged him  
All over Europe and half round the world  
To expensive hotels and undesirable society  
Which she could choose herself. (20)

Being an outsider of his family, Harry's wife serves as a lifeline to help him escape from his family. I think Harry attempts to evade Amy's control by marrying his wife, and the act of marrying empowers him to make him think that he possess the power to defy his mother. Unfortunately, Harry's marital life repeats the same mode as his childhood with Amy and his wife turns out to be as demanding as Amy. Tinged with a mother's jealousy, Amy's recount may be exaggerated but she acutely captures the essence of their relationship: his wife's desire to dominate and possess Harry. This outcome is predictable in Klein's theoretical framework, because she thinks there cannot establish the successful relationship without the reparation with the mother beforehand (Wieland 63). Harry's claim to murder his wife is actually his attempt to show that he is powerful enough to fight against the demanding Amy. Yet the thought of murdering his wife and his mother arouses his sense of guilty, so the appearance of the Furies is the embodiment of his inner feeling. On the one hand he wants to empower himself to live an independent life; on the other hand, he knows this method is an impasse.

Harry's reparation with his mother goes not smoothly. After his insistence on seeing the apparition of the Furies, Amy decides to call up the family doctor Warburton to diagnose Harry. During their meeting, Warburton continually requests Harry to behave normally lest exacerbating Amy's illness. Harry's indignation erupts in his retort:

HARRY. What about my mother?  
Everything has always been referred back to mother.  
When we were children, before we went to school,  
The rule of conduct was simply pleasing mother;  
Misconduct was simply being unkind to mother;

What was wrong was whatever made her suffer,  
And whatever made her happy was what was virtuous—  
Though never very happy, I remember. That was why  
We all felt like failures, before we had begun.

.....  
For punishment made us feel less guilty. Mother  
Never punished us, but made us feel guilty. (72-73)

Without the interference of the father figure, Amy ascends to be the sole authority determining her children's behavior. Warburton's request reminds Harry of his unpleasant childhood in which the center is around his mother. Providing us with the profound analysis of how Harry's sense of guilt initiates his defiance, Leo Hamalian shows the hostility and distrust circulating between Harry and Amy are actually resulting from a series of affective interactions (113). Harry's resistance to pleasing Amy induces his sense of guilt, so he desired to be punished to lessen his guilt. He is indeed caught in the dilemma that Amy's chastisement reinforces his hostility but without it he is distressed by his culpability. Melanie Klein observes that at the time the children feel dominated by these hostile impulses and in his mind destroys the mother's goodness and love, they feel not only persecuted by her, but also guilty and bereft of the good object (EG 280). Although Wishwood is the locus of guilt for Harry (Hamalian 113), his return may show his desire to retrieve the good object. Despite his intention to thwart Harry's urge to investigate the mystery of his family, Warburton's statement accidentally revives Harry's dire memory of family and strengthens his resolution to find out the truth.

Warburton. Harry, there's no good probing for misery.  
There was enough once: but what festered  
Then, has only left a cautery.  
Leave it alone. You know that your mother  
And your father were never happy together:  
They separated by mutual consent  
And he went to live abroad. You were only a boy  
When he died. You would not remember.  
Harry. But now I do remember. Not Arthur or John  
They were too young. But now I remember. . . (74)

In his effort to curb Harry from probing into the mystery, Warburton unwittingly helps Harry to express his trauma. From Klein's point of view, the children's early feeling of not knowing has manifold connection (LGR 188). Not yet fully developed intellectually, the overwhelming questions children encountered are only partly conscious by them. Even when they are conscious of the questions, they still cannot adequately express them in words (LGR 188). Klein further construes that this feeling of not knowing accentuate the Oedipus complex (LGR 188). Deprived of the father figure to identify with, Harry cannot resolve his Oedipus complex. The sole presence of Amy enhances the disruptive feeling caused by the disparity between the good and the bad object, because affects which should be directed to the father transfer to her. After getting closer to the core of the mystery, Harry shows his craving to know whether he shares likeness with his father: "Tell me / Did you know my father at about my present age?" (77). By knowing more about his father, Harry can create a clearer image of the father. Thus, Harry can transfer the affects which should be directed to his father back to

this imaginary paternal image. Without tainted by the affects, Harry can begin to see Amy in the more justified way. Amy is actually a worn-out mother with only her strong will to keep her going on, and Harry's reparation need to resort to the substitute maternal object.

During the *tete-a-tete* between Agatha and Harry, Agatha reveals to him the hidden family secret which he searches for a long time. Agatha even admits that she feels Harry in some way hers (101), because without her help Amy might probably be killed by Harry's father. Agatha stands in as the good object to make the reparation possible and she also brings this dark family secret into the full conscious. Harry's destructive impulse toward his wife is actually the replication from his father, once he knows the origin of this impulse he is freed from its influence. The Furies which are the embodiment of Harry's inner feelings reappears as the Eumenides, and their transformation shows Harry is purged from his destructive impulse and finishes his reparation.

### Notes

1. Quotations are from *The Family Reunion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1951).
2. Later abbreviated as LGR.
3. Abbreviated as EG.

### Works Cited

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