Chapter 3

Good Older Brother, Bad Younger Brother: Sibling Rivalry in the Hirata Family

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Last night, saying it was a drinking party, you committed acts of violence and insulted several people in front of our ancestor’s spirit. Moreover, it is outrageous that you have misbehaved numerous times on a regular basis, causing us to lose face with regard to our house’s scholarship. As a consequence, henceforth except for official business I will have nothing to do with you.¹

Hirata Kanetane (1799–1880) addressed this document to Miki Kaneya (1830–?), then 36 years old, following an evening in the first month of 1866 when Kaneya had behaved badly. Kaneya was Kanetane’s second son and thus Hirata Atsutane’s (1776–1843) grandson; he also had other siblings who appear much less frequently in the Hirata family archive than does the eldest son, Nobutane (1828–1872). Thanks to Nobutane’s position as heir, the letters he wrote to his parents, his essays on politics and religion, and his career in the early Meiji Bureau of Shinto Affairs, his life is well documented. Had Kaneya not been a troublemaker, we would know as little about him as we do about his two younger brothers.

The Hirata Atsutane archive exists because the family saved records pertaining to Atsutane and the administration of the Hirata School, but the documents it contains can be used for many different purposes. Yoshida Asako, for example, has used them to demonstrate how Atsutane and Kanetane managed each step in the publication of Atsutane’s writings and argues that Atsutane involved his disciples in a collaborative effort that belies the common image of him as isolated from other intellectuals.² Endō Jun highlights Atsutane’s historical understanding and argues that focusing on the Hirata School’s involvement in political movements at the end of the Tokugawa era has slighted its

religious dimension that proved to be the more enduring. I find these documents of interest because of the light they shed on family relations.

As a scholar, Atsutane contributed to the construction of a sense of identity for modern Japanese; as a warrior, he joined the Akita domain’s retainer band in 1838. Following his exile to Akita in 1841, he acquired rank and stipend from the domain, and the family left behind in Edo moved into the Akita domain’s barracks near Asakusa. Until the abolition of domains in 1871, the family served the Satake daimyos as bureaucrats at the same time that it served its own interests in running the Hirata School. It enjoyed the privilege of samurai status, a guaranteed if low income, and a place to live. The men in the family also had to attend domain ceremonies, follow the domain’s orders, and get permission from the domain whenever they traveled or changed residence through adoption. This dual affiliation provided the context for Kaneya’s life.

Kaneya’s life as reflected in the Hirata Atsutane archive provides the materials for three interrelated types of analysis. The first draws on masculinity studies to focus on unequal relations between brothers in family-centered household enterprises passed down from father to eldest son such as those found in nineteenth-century Japan. The second draws on feminist analysis, which, as Toby L. Ditz points out, emphasizes that “the gender order concerns, in particular, men’s access to women and how that access is maintained, challenged, and altered.” The third deals with the historical study of emotions—the imposition, breaking, and compromising of emotional norms. What links these approaches is that they all illuminate how power works at the micro-level of the individual and the family. My aim is to shed light on the intertwining of family relations and social structure through the experience of a single individual. At the same time, I caution against pigeonholing Kaneya as merely representative of his position and class. After all, not every second son ended up disowned by his father.

My project is to analyze how this system of primogeniture operated and what meaning it had for individuals and their families by unpacking the phrase ‘good elder brother, bad younger brother’ (ii aniki, warui otōto). This bit of conventional wisdom speaks to a hierarchy of values expressed in differing access to office, to income, and to emotional expression. Michael Kimmel has pointed out that most men are “not privileged by class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, age or physical abilities,” and to this we must add birth