In Parzival, Wolfram von Eschenbach often has the court of the land and the families of its members face off against each other as opposing and equal institutions that suffer at each others’ hands. It seems that by the end of his work, v. Eschenbach reaches the conclusion that the crown conquers all, even familial blood.

In many period works, Medieval courts are portrayed much like families. The King sits at the head, the Queen is mother to the court and the multi-various nobles and potentates all have their own niche within the family of state. Courts are shown to mirror families in respects other than structure. The fatherly King often consults his greatest (eldest) nobles before making important decisions. The King imposes rules and laws that all members are expected to obey and other unmentioned codes often exist. Most of the courtiers often bicker and fight among themselves, jockeying for recognition or prestige much like quarrelsome siblings. The courtly family is quite different from a family joined by blood in that the family of state can choose its members and having membership revoked is at all times possible.

One of the major aspects of both blood and courtly families is that they are portrayed to be all but mutually exclusive. There are a set of established interfaces between courtly and blood families, namely marriage and knightly investiture, but besides these conduits the
families of the crown and blood cannot coexist. This is portrayed strongly in Parzival where Parzival himself and Gawan both are forced to wrong either their family by blood or crown in order to be a virtuous member of the other family.

In Parzival, Parzival kills two of his own kin in the service of knightly virtues. The first of his blood family to fall to his knightly sword is his Uncle in-law Ither, which is revealed to him by a monk who is his uncle as well, “You are of the same stock as Ither, yet ignoring the ties of blood you raised your hand against him.” (Wolfram, pg. 253) It is through the slaying of Ither that Parzival becomes a knight. In fact, King Arthur tells him that Ither has been bothering the court and that if Parzival does kill him, Arthur will make him a knight. In effect the head of the courtly family has offered Parzival entrance for the price of his own relative’s blood.

This situation is somewhat more complicated by the fact that Parzival doesn’t know Ither. Upon gaining some wisdom and refinement later Parzival laments killing such a virtuous knight and redoubles his sorrow upon learning Ither was also his Uncle in-law. Wolfram here seems to be putting foolish courtly ambition solidly afield against strong familial virtue and courtly accomplishment. Ither is an accomplished knight, a virtuous man and powerful lord and relative of Parzival, yet Parzival crushes Ither the zeal of his courtly ambitions and greed for the knightly office. In more abstract terms, an ambitious fool topples a great knight and a kinsman just to gain entrance to the court family.

A more subtle aspect of the slaughter is that Parzival never questioned the king about Ither and he never talked to Ither himself, except to demand surrender. This is a theme that
runs throughout the book. Knights constantly join battle with each other with the only preliminaries being the lowering of their lances. This blind trust in courtly authority brings Parzival much pain later. Parzival also blames himself, not the king, for setting himself upon the path that lead to his uncle’s death. Wolfram seems here to be casting aspersions upon the courtly family’s virtue. The crown was only worried about stopping a threat to its person, not the death of person or the effects of his death on others. The courtly family through this is shown to exist on a plane separate from that of the blood family. Parzival kills not only his uncle, but his mother as well in his courtly fervor.

The Parzival’s ascetic uncle also informs him of his mother’s death, “No sooner had you left your mother than she died - that was what she had for her love.” (Wolfram, pg. 243) Parzival’s mother had sequestered him in hopes that he would never learn of knighthood, as it was knighthood that slew his father. (Wolfram, pg. 70-71)

Wolfram has courtly power kill both Parzival’s father and mother and in the death of the latter has made Parzival an accomplice in the crime. Parzival’s mother wanted only for her son to grow up and live long by keeping him from the court and living in a small house in the woods. Yet the court’s all-pervasive power reaches deep into the forest and plucks Parzival from his home. Wolfram has the family of the crown crush the family of blood and kills the one who tried to weaken it (Parzival’s mother) in the process. Wolfram’s mouthpiece in the story, Parzival’s ascetic uncle, is the one who reveals all this to him.
The figure of Parzival’s uncles speaks almost as much as the happening he makes Parzival aware of. Parzival’s uncle is never named, but proves his relationship to Parzival. Mysteriously nameless he is a knight who had forsaken the courtly family as well as his blood relatives and went to live as an ascetic. It seems by not taking the side of either blood or crown he has ensured his safety.

Only by forsaking both families can he escape the power of either. Parzival’s uncle is also set against Parzival as an example. Not only is he virtuous and devoted to God, but he keeps a detailed account of time’s passage (as evidenced when he tells Parzival when his mother died) by relating events to the church’s liturgical rotations through his Psalter. Parzival is shown to be incredibly oblivious to the passage of time when told his mother died over four years hence. Not only is his uncle disciplined and virtuous, but he seems all but omniscient, an odd quality for a hermit. Oddly this old man living in the middle of the forest knows very well the flow of current events. This seems to be done, again, in contrast to Parzival who has a mission, yet is still blundering about in a seemingly fruitless search for the castle that holds the Gral. It seems here that Wolfram holds up this one lone man, the one who had the personal discipline to escape the power of the family of the crown for another, the family of God, as one greater than Parzival.

While Parzival is sorrowful beyond measure for his deeds he never questioned that which put him in place and gave him motivation to do such things, the knighthood, his membership in the courtly family. Wolfram has Parzival hopelessly stuck in the power of the
courtly family, which he remain in no matter what the consequences, while his uncle who had the wherewithal to escape it, can do nothing but look on sorrowfully. Like his well-informed monk in the woods, the reason for Wolfram’s portrayal of the family of the court as an all-penetrating unethical and vindictive force is not altogether clear.

Wolfram cites himself as being a poor knight, bound to his land within Parzival. As such he would be an unwilling, even captive member of the family of the crown. Somewhat like Parzival he would have been scooped up from his life as a happy child to be trained as a knight to take his father’s place. He may also have had Parzival’s exuberance for the knighthood when he was young, but unlike Parzival Wolfram may have become disenchanted with it when faced with the reality of the power wielded by the courtly family. Quite possibly he may have been forced to undertake some distasteful tasks that may have harmed his own kin. Wolfram shields Parzival by making him oblivious to such ties until after the fact.

Parzival’s early life may have been meant by Wolfram to be indicative of the state of affairs in German nobility at the time. Parzival is mystically grabbed by the power of the court and is incredibly determined to succeed. With only his determination Parzival ventures forth and leaves in his wake shame and death. Perhaps the entry of many such buffoons into the once-proud knightly ranks was seen by Wolfram to have soiled the virtuous office.

The only person who is free of the power of the court is Parzival’s uncle, a man who gave up both families and devoted himself to God. This could be interpreted as a statement by Wolfram that the only virtue left was in the church. The family of the court is too
powerful for the family of blood as evidenced by the death of Parzival’s mother and his investiture as a knight. The only power left then would be that of God, which can shield those within the family of the church.

Even though there are special exceptions to the rule, namely Parzival’s uncle the hermit and Cundrie the sorceress, all people either serve the family of their blood or the family of the crown and in time all seem either to pledge service to the crown, or are killed by it. Wulfram spreads personal opinion very liberally through Parzival. He offers commentary on the phenomenon of love and on the lot of women and even an apology in one point for his treatment of them. It would seem this work was quite personal to him in many respects. Considering his statements about his own poverty and indenture to the land and its king, it seems most probable the incredible power of the family of the crown was brought to the story from Wulfram’s own experience and pervades the story of Parzival as it most probably pervaded his own consciousness.