

Jacobean england essay



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The world of Jacobean England was one of disorder due to immense changes within the social structure. An emerging middle class required a new social code to meet the needs of a changing class structure. New emergent ideas were rapidly acknowledged thus putting forward new concepts of family morality, social morality and feudal order. Indeed, the world of contemporary England parallels Elizabethan England of Shakespeare's time in which disturbing social changes were also taking place and "threatening the validity of Shakespeare's essentially conservative outlook" (Bernard Lott 'King Lear: Longman Critical Essays' 1998, pg.

7). In Jacobean England, the concept of family love and loyalty was "an ideology intended to keep the power and property structure in place" (Bernard Lott 'King Lear: Longman Critical Essays' 1998, pg. 52). Therefore, it is comprehensible why King Lear's central concerns are the family and the connected theme of human relationships. The natural and often fragile unit of the family is fundamental in allowing Shakespeare to exemplify the sustained natural order of the universe and the chaos and turmoil that results from unnatural behaviour within this unit; A wretch whom nature is ashamed Almost to acknowledge hers.

" (1, I 208-9) The royal family was esteemed highly in Jacobean times and any unsettling of such an influential family would result in unsettling and disorder throughout the land, threatening hierarchical systems of the time. Shakespeare lived in a time when; "the ideas and social structures formed in the middle-ages still informed mans thoughts and ideas" (Encyclopaedia Britannica CD Rom 2000). The monarch of the time was believed to be God's representative on earth/an embodiment of God's will and naturally it

followed that God installed a king and determined his length of reign and in keeping with this natural order the Lords and Commoners had their place under the monarch. King Lear is a play therefore that strives to display emerging generations and conflicts of age and status within the family. Indeed, the beginning scene sees Lear performing an act that was fundamentally abhorrent at the time - abdicating; " We have divided in three our kingdom; and 'tis our fast intent To shake all cares and business from our age, Conferring them on younger strengths," (1, I: 33-6). For a critic such as Tillyard, Lear is offending the natural world order by relinquishing his crown to his daughters; " Since now we will divest us both of our rule Interest of territory , cares of state - Which of you shall we say doth love us most? " (1, I: 45-7).

It would appear that public concerns have intervened with family issues in Lear's decision to divide the kingdom into three parts in a public charade that demonstrates fully the extent of Lear's vanity and his foolishness in founding justice and merit upon public declarations of love. This show of public falsity (and in Cordelia's case ' private truth' is Lear's plan for a public exchange of political power based on declaration of love by his daughters" (Shakespeare's Texts and Contexts, Macmillian 2000, pg 245). In scene one, fatherly love appears to be contingent upon the recognition of achievement in tests of ' love' and " parental love contingent upon performance" (Mark R. Schwehn ' King Lear Beyond Reason: Love and Justice in the Family' October 1993, 25-33).

Here King Lear understands love in quantative terms, equating the amount of love effusively expressed vocally by his daughters to a true measure of

their love. Lear firmly believes in the patriarchal and hierarchical body politic in which subjects (not excluding family) have a political duty of obedience and loyalty. The ‘glib’ praises uttered by Goneril and Regan are manifestly false, yet to Lear (who appears all too obsessed with filial gratitude) these speeches of excessive flattery are his due. His arrogance and vanity are the fatal flaws that prevent Lear from seeing the speeches in the way they are actually intended – meaningless words said for material gain.

Cordelia also sees through her sister’s false declarations, yet her simple truth that she has loved and honoured her father with a child’s duty appears cold and insignificant in comparison with her sister’s speeches (especially as she was her father’s favourite); “What should Cordelia do? Love and be silent” (1, I: 58) Cordelia’s opening speech does however express her love for her father in terms that Aristotle used to describe filial love; “Parents love children more than children love parents because they love children as being part of themselves and have known them for longer” (Mark R. Schwehn ‘King Lear Beyond Reason: Love and Justice in the Family’ October 1993, 25-33). When asked to capture filial love in her speech, Cordelia speaks truly of her duties (aware though of the imminent dangers of doing so). “You have begot me, bred me, loved me, I return those duties back as they are right fit, Obey you, love you and most honour you” (1, I: 92-94) Cordelia loves her father as any child should, yet Lear turns his back on his daughter, and thus begins to destroy the natural hierarchy of the family unit (which I will elaborate upon in the latter part of the essay). The position of women within the family structure in Jacobean times was rigid. The woman remained her

father's property to dispose of until she was married and henceforth became the sole property of her husband (once the dowry had been paid).

Is Cordelia not justified, in Shakespeare's opinion, in questioning the extent of her sister's love for their father whilst being the 'sole-property' of their husbands. "Why have my sister's husbands, if they say They love you all?" (1, I: 95-6) In her literal understanding of love, Cordelia gives half of her love to her father and half to her soon-to-be husband. The extent of Lear's pride (and indeed his foolishness) is revealed in its enormity and Cordelia hears, in a public display, her father disown her. Yet Cordelia has resolved to "love and be silent", therefore remaining dutiful and obedient to her father. Indeed, in comparison, Goneril and Regan's insolence towards their father reveals contempt for the very hierarchical principle that commends respect for both fathers and kings: "he hath ever but slenderly known himself" (1, ii: 86-7) The three-fold dignity of a king, old man and a father are dishonoured by the cruel ingratitude of his unnatural daughters (who Lear later sees as monsters of ingratitude).

It is apparent that Shakespeare intends his audience to see Goneril and Regan in their true guises through the revelations conveyed throughout the play concerning their low opinions of their father. As Cordelia observes in reference to Lear and the audience: "Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides, Who covers faults, at last with shame derides." (1, I: 224-6) Goneril and Regan do not think of their father as someone who is old and requires their care and attention in a family manner but rather as someone who is a continuing danger to their political authority (Kiernan Ryan 'Shakespeare's Texts and Contexts', Macmillan 2000). The fool sings to Lear

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of the harsh truths about love and justice between parent and child; “
Fathers that wear rags Do make their children blind But fathers that wear
bags Shall see their children kind” (11, iv: 47-51) The fool serves the purpose
of making facts obvious to the audience, and thus the irony at once arises that
the fool is indeed wiser and more insightful than Lear. Yet through the Fool's
revelations, Lear is able to discern that poverty and lack of status will lead to
indifference in his children whilst richness will lead to false kindness.

In the play, Shakespeare introduces a distinct underplot that demonstrates
another example of filial ingratitude and impetuous fathers who reject their
righteous child. The Lear and Gloucester family thus complement each other
and are paralleled throughout the play as the tragic circumstances in which
Lear and Gloucester find themselves. In Jacobean times, parental love
involved blood, law and merit over trust and sentiment, therefore the
children would strive to earn affection for their parents through deeds and
proofs of their worthiness. However, Shakespeare shows in the characters of
Cordelia and Edgar that honesty is a more excellent way of expressing filial
love. Shakespeare also highlights the three principle causes of ‘quarrel’ as a
result of human nature; competition, diffidence and glory, and this further
proves that human nature cannot be deterred or oppressed by natural laws
(‘Shakespeare’s Doctrine of Nature: A Study of King Lear’, John F. Danby;
Faber 1978, pg 41).

At its essence, King Lear is a play about families not behaving in a ‘natural’
manner and as Tillyard observes; “an Elizabethan world picture.... is a vision
of a stable social and political hierarchy, headed by a divinely appointed

monarch" (Tillyard 1944, quoted in Shakespeare's Texts and Contexts 2000, Kiernan Ryan).

Tillyard believed that all was controlled by nature and as individuals we must accept our position within this "natural structure of society according to our roles within the existing hierarchy of the time" (Tillyard handout from class, untitled/dated). Accepting one's place would ultimately mean accepting that it is right to be obedient to those higher within the hierarchy whilst commanding obedience from those lower. This feudal view of nature was accepted by Lear, Edgar and Cordelia who believed nature to be an order which is ultimately divine and pre-ordained, whereas Goneril, Regan and Edmund believed in an emergent nature as a purely physical form with no divine dimension, a concept of nature accepted as individualistic and forward thinking. Yet Shakespeare belonged to a static/immutable Elizabethan world in which "nature demonstrated how everyone has his place and knows his obligations, thus the status quo is maintained" (www. Shakespeare.

com/essays). Ultimately, this would entitle monarchs the ability to justify their powerful positions through using the concept of 'laws of nature', therefore it is hardly surprising that an outsider of the framework of social and moral conformity should choose to reject the traditional natural order and develop an emergent ideal which did not sustain the natural order of the time such as Edmund. Shakespeare observes however that nature is powerless when the human world collapses; resulting in a father expelled by his daughters and a son rejected by his father. Shakespeare's play presents the resulting chaos as a result of unnatural behaviour. In essence the play depicts the failure of a father's power in commanding love and respect in a

patriarchal world and the emotional penalty he pays for wielding power. The play derives a stern rebuke to the “ absolutist, patriarchal power wielded by Kings, leading to a critique of the social and economic injustices of Jacobean England” (Coppelia Kahn 1986, ‘ The Absent Mother in King Lear’ Chicago University Press). The family roles in this play and in all societies are constantly re-defined and positions altered through power struggles within the family.

The hierarchical system is unstable within the family resulting in changes in status and a destabilising effect, when the status of the head of state is questioned subjects are unsure whom to serve, thus the chaotic effects of divergence of power within the royal family reverberate throughout the realm; giving Edmund an opportunity to make a bid for the crown: “ Edmund is offered a chance to act with the full-dignity of a high-born, to take up the class legacy his father did not leave him” (Rosalie L. Colie 1974 ‘ Some Facets of King Lear’, Heinemann Press, pg 208). Edmund is the representative of the new man in the Jacobean age, reducing his brother Edgar to a primitive state of being as an outcast of society while overriding his natural position as a bastard to become an heir to his father. The social and moral problems of the Jacobean era are analysed and utilised well by Shakespeare in King Lear. Yet in a cultural context it could be suggested that Shakespeare’s plays were not written by Shakespeare but rather they were written by Elizabethan England.