

The concept of nature in king lear and its subjective connotations

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The Christian kings of England could suppose a “divine right” imposed by “natural order” in order to legitimize their place in the feudal hierarchy, a view bolstered by Christ’s admonishment to “Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s” (Matthew 22: 21) and various other Biblical representations and endorsements of worldly rulers. In a pre-Christian society, the legitimacy of rulers could not be so easily predicated on this concept of an ordained nature of the world, with one metaphysical Lord atop one secular Lord atop Man. Yet in such a society, “Nature” maintains its value as a term connoting “order,” how things simply are. The qualities of Nature are thus induced from experience and a sense of propriety: filial duty is “Nature,” kinship is “Nature,” moral behavior is “Nature,” stability is “Nature,” sanity is “Nature” and the physical world itself is simply “Nature.” The problem is that in the absence of a scriptural definition, these are all subjective notions, each representing part of a certain dialectic of human society. Depending on the experiences of the beholder, “Nature” can just as easily connote treachery, disloyalty, immorality, instability, insanity, and a violent physical world. If a leader’s rule is predicated on a tradition of Nature representing feudal order, then competing definitions and evaluations of Nature would inevitably throw this society into disorder. In King Lear, this disorder is played out between two competing views of Nature, each viewer professing fealty to his individual conception of Nature.

“Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law / My services are bound” (1. 2. 1-2). Edmund’s “nature” is an unregulated, uncivilized force a pre-human world contrasting with the “plague of custom” and the laws of man. This conception of nature emanates from Edmund’s life experience, ironically, as

a “ natural” (i. e. a bastard): Edmund is condemned by what he considers to be unreasonable inheritance custom, one which he finds unintuitive and illogical. An illegitimate son who is considered ignoble by the social standards he does not accept, Edmund is thus led to condemn all forms of legitimacy: the legitimacy of kings, the legitimacy of fathers, the legitimacy of morality. He proceeds to challenge all these forms over the course of the play as he disrupts this natural order and helps send Britain into chaos.

The Earl of Gloucester holds a different view of nature from that of his illegitimate son. He considers an eclipse — a disorder or interruption in the natural sky — portentous of disorder, using “ nature” to explicitly represent order and stability: “ nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects” (1. 2. 98-9). This scourge is an upending of social bonds viewed as natural: friends, lovers, citizens, fathers and sons. This connotation is then connected to King Lear’s rule, as he “ falls from bias of nature” (1. 2. 103): the king deviating from his nature (wise rule) is thus unnatural (causes instability). Edmund later insults his father’s fealty to such “ natural” portents as the “ evasion” of them whose behavior caused their own misfortune.

As a warrior-king who ruled Britain for decades, Lear holds a conception of nature that is similarly antithetical to Edmund’s view. Like Gloucester, Lear is attuned to physical nature and the divinity of stars. Lear disinherits Cordelia with an appeal to Heavenly bodies, in a way “ naturalizing” Lear’s decision and ascribing his wishes to the stars that consign men to their fates:

For by the sacred radiance of the sun,

The mysteries of Hecate, and the night;

By all the operation of the orbs

From whom we do exist and cease to be (1. 1. 109-12)

Lear curses Goneril by “ goddess Nature” as well: “ Hear, Nature, hear! dear goddess, hear! / Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend / To make this creature fruitful! (1. 4. 253-4) Here, as in other instances, Lear uses “ Nature” to represent a divine “ creator,” an ambiguous personification of the process by which one’s personality is forged. In this vein Lear calls Cordelia “ a wretch whom nature is ashamed / Almost to acknowledge [as] hers” (1. 1. 214). Lear’s loyal Earl of Kent later parrots this usage, telling a servant disrespectful to the King that, “ nature disclaims in thee; a tailor made thee” (2. 2. 48). In this instance, “ unnaturalness” is artificiality, an inhuman separation from natural elements.

This usage holds “ nature” to be a creative force, one which warrants respect. Hence, “ unnaturalness,” in the sense that one is rejected by nature is akin to exile or disinheritance. In positing a superior creative force of Nature, Lear implicitly suggests an intuitive hierarchy, with the elements of nature being the very reason for humanity’s existence — “ Nothing will come of nothing” (1. 1. 89). A clear human parallel exists in familial hierarchy, by which a father is deserving of his children’s respect. Lear presupposes this filial duty in referring to familial love as “ nature,” as it would be proper or “ natural” for one to love those who bore him or her (the word “ nature” is indeed traced back to the Latin verb for birth, “ nascor, nasci”). In dividing

his kingdom, Lear declares, " That we our largest bounty may extend / Where nature [filial love] doth with merit [deed] challenge" (1. 1. 50-1). Lear's love of his daughters is similarly his " nature," as he declares after cursing Goneril, " I will forget my nature. So kind a father!" (1. 5. 27). Gloucester echoes this usage as well, punning on the term in approval of Edmund, beaming, " Loyal and natural boy, I'll work the means / To make thee capable," playing off the senses " dutiful/loving" and " illegitimate" (2. 1. 85-6). Unnaturalness, then, is filial disloyalty. As Gloucester believes his legitimate son Edgar to be plotting against him, he declares, " Unnatural, detested, brutish villain!" (1. 2. 72). Edmund disingenuously repeats this, warning Edgar of " unnaturalness between the child and the parent" (1. 2. 132).

This sense of loyalty to a creator or a creative force ought to be familiar to a Christian audience, but it is not necessarily a given (e. g., scripturally dictated) in a pre-Christian society. Instead it emanates from a familial gratitude and an inherent moral tendency towards loyalty, held by the likes of plainspoken Cordelia and Kent and expressed within the play as simply the traits of these characters. Cordelia simply insists, " I love your majesty / According to my bond" and " You have begot me, bred me, loved me; I / Return those duties back as are right fit, / Obey you, love you, and most honor you" (1. 1. 91-2, 95-7). Kent offers no specific reason for persevering to serve Lear except out of duty to a feudal lord: " Royal Lear, / Whom I have ever honored as my king, / Loved as my father, as my master followed, / As my great patron" (1. 1. 139-142). However, Kent goes further than basic

service, defying Lear's command into exile and disguising himself to continue aiding "thy master, whom thou lovest" (1. 4. 6).

By contrast, Edmund's "nature" goddess of disorder suggests he has no moral compass. Whereas Cordelia would not flatter her father even as she stands to inherit a share of his estate, Edmund, who stands to receive nothing, chooses to fight for his father's entire estate through elaborate treachery. Edmund perhaps knows nothing of gratitude, set to receive nothing from his father (Nothing of Nothing), whereas Cordelia has an abundance of it. Natural duty, as its presented in the play, emanates from gratitude. Lear conflates the two in appealing to Regan thus: "thou better know'st / The offices of nature, bond of childhood, / Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude" (2. 4. 171-3). Of course, Lear's elder two daughters are ingrates on every level. Regan and Goneril are ungrateful both for their father's love and for their father's estate. Albany describes his wife's disposition accurately, calling it "That nature, which contemns its origin" (4. 2. 33). Goneril (and by extension, Regan) is simply of a cruel disposition, despising her "origin," which may be taken to mean ingratitude towards either a paternal origin (Lear), a natural origin (that which causes one to enter into existence), or a mental origin (the experiences or processes that caused this disposition).

At the end of the play, Edmund, dying, tries to redeem himself, and in doing so concedes his own conception of nature to be false. He says, "Some good I mean to do, / Despite of mine own nature" (5. 3. 242-3). "Nature" here cannot mean "filial duty," "illegitimacy," or "the physical world of

randomness." Instead, it must refer to Edmund's personal tendencies and morality, which he at last admits have been incredibly base. The fact that Edmund is capable of acknowledging this (albeit a bit late) and, in doing so, overcoming this "nature" indicates that Edmund's immoral tendencies, while very real, can be overcome by conscious decision. At his death, Edmund begins to place a value on reconciliation and familial duty, moved by his half-brother's own story of duty and the death of their father. Whereas Edmund coldheartedly insisted earlier that "nature gives way to loyalty" (3. 5. 2-3), Edgar proclaims to the illegitimate brother who usurped his estate, "I am no less in blood than thou art, Edmund; / If more, the more thou hast wronged me" (5. 3. 164-5). Edgar thus rejects the notion of illegitimacy and forces Edmund to come to terms with his deliberate immorality.

In many ways, Lear's treatment of Pagan morality vis-a-vis nature prefigures the Christian nature that would later maintain the status quo in feudal Britain. In this sense, the play is didactic: gratitude, duty, and honesty irrespective of expectation are virtues that foster order, which is a facile value for everyone irrespective of station, including the bastards and the poor. Delirious Lear proclaims, "Nature's above art" (4. 6. 86), honesty and reality are preferable to pretension and hypocrisy. While treachery and disingenuousness are explicitly sinful in the Biblical sense, falsity is an obvious flaw in any society, when one relies on one's senses to be keenly aware of the natural world as reality. The plainspoken loyalists of the play, despite their perceived brusqueness, are, in their natures if not their words, clearly the greatest advocates for their masters.