

Order, chaos, and climax in king lear

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A recurring theme throughout William Shakespeare's *King Lear* is the perpetual struggle between order and chaos, played out in the arena of human existence. While such characters as Lear, Cordelia, Albany and Edgar try to impose their sense of divine and moral order on the muddled world around them, the insubordination of Goneril, Regan and Edmund serves to undermine these attempts, leading inexorably towards a catastrophic climax in the play's final scene. Interestingly, the play does not follow a straight downwards path from order to chaos; rather, it acts somewhat like a roller coaster, enduring a fall when Goneril, Regan and Edmund usurp the throne, then a slow ascension as all three die in the final scene, and finally a sharp drop after the central moment in the text: Cordelia's death. As a playwright, Shakespeare knew that his work was meant to be performed, and this structure allows for the most emotional response from the audience. Instead of a gradual decline in order, which would have given the audience time to prepare themselves for the coming chaos, Shakespeare offers us a building sense of hope that suddenly crumbles into despair. Thus, the very structure of the play reflects the disorderliness that rules the lives of its characters. Over the course of Act V, Scene iii, near the end of which Cordelia dies, we witness the growing success of Albany and Edgar in their attempts to reestablish the orders of law and divine judgement; however, when the virtuous Cordelia is killed, these concepts become incompatible with reality, and *King Lear* plummets into chaos. At the beginning of Act V, Scene iii, chaos has gripped the kingdom; the monarchy, as well as other positions, is in disarray. Lear, believing that his sentence is to live out his days incarcerated with Cordelia, attempts to remove himself from the turmoil of

the realm and institute a new order in prison. He says:[We'll] hear poor roguesTalk of court news; and we'll talk with them too, Who loses and who wins; who's in, and who's out; And take upon 's the mystery of things, As if we were God's spies; and we'll wear out, In a walled prison, packs and sects of great ones, That ebb and flow by the moon. (V, iii, 13-19)In prison, Lear says, he and his daughter will retain some connection with the going-on of the court, the confusion of which he emphasizes with his nonchalant " who loses and who wins; who's in, and who's out." By discussing the monarchy's constant state of flux so lightly, Lear points out not only that turmoil, but also the meaninglessness of it all; for Lear, it does not matter " who's in," because sooner or later he will become " who's out." Having recognized this pointlessness, Lear goes on to separate himself and Cordelia from the chaos that has taken over, claiming that they can " take upon [them] the mystery of things, / As if [they] were God's spies," outside observers of said chaos from some ordered, heavenly realm, and as such the only people capable of understanding the chaotic world. Next, by saying, " we'll wear out, / In a walled prison, packs and sects of great ones," Lear posits that a life within the " walled prison" of order will necessarily outlast the warring groups that have created chaos in his kingdom; the very chaos produced by power-hungry factions serves to destroy any chance of their ultimate survival. Thus, early in the final scene, we see a recognition of and conscious withdrawal from the perils of political and moral chaos, to be followed shortly by Albany's and Edgar's attempted elimination of the chaotic forces. Later in the scene, in the midst of internal squabbling among the conspirators, the Duke of Albany tries to recapture the lost order of the law. After learning of

the extramarital relationship between his wife and Edmund, Albany angrily says: Stay yet; hear reason. Edmund, I arrest thee On capital treason; and, in thine attaint, This gilded serpent [pointing to Goneril]. For your claim, fair sister, I bar it in the interest of my wife; 'Tis she is sub-contracted to this lord, And I, her husband, contradict your banes. (V, iii, 83-88) This speech points to Albany's desire to erase the crimes of his wife and her party, to return to the days before Cordelia's banishment. In the first line, he beseeches Edmund to "hear reason," despite reason's necessary exclusion from the villains' mutiny against the traditional order of monarchy. Albany then "arrests" Edmund, again seeming to ignore the utter lack of a legal system in the chaotic realm that has emerged. Finally, referring to Goneril's desire to marry Edmund, Albany refers to her as "sub-contracted"; yet, clearly Goneril did not respect her filial contract with her father, so Albany has no reason to believe she will obey her marriage contract with him. In essence, Albany is striving to superimpose the old set of legal rules on top of a world in which legality is irrelevant. At this point in the play, then, his attempt seems childish and self-delusional; later, however, the audience realizes that the villains' preferred existence cannot survive, and Albany's sense of order begins to prevail. This scene represents the turning of the knob to open the door for the law's reentry into the kingdom. Soon after, Edgar claims that the divine order of right and wrong still exists even in the midst of political chaos; the deaths of all three conspirators seem to support this statement. Gloucester's rightful heir, Edgar appears on the scene to confront his illegitimate brother, Edmund. Upon felling his opponent, Edgar warns him, "The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us"

(V, iii, 170-171). In this way, like Albany before him, Edgar tries to impose a system of order where none is yet apparent. If the gods truly were just, Cordelia never would have been banished from the kingdom, Gloucester would still have his eyes, and Lear his throne. As the scene develops, however, the audience begins to witness more and more evidence that Edgar's contention is the truth. First, Edgar defeats Edmund, leaving the earldom of Gloucester to its legitimate owner. Second, in a fight for Edmund's love, the two colluding sisters, Goneril and Regan, kill each other. Not only does this support Edgar's assertion of divine justice via the creation of self-destructive vices, but also Lear's earlier intimation that order would necessarily outlast chaos, which is too unstable to survive. To the audience, then, as the tension builds, it appears that the forces of order and morality are in position to defeat those of chaos and wrongdoing. Immediately before the crucial moment of the play, the audience is treated to a final clue that order will prevail. The dying Edmund consciously abandons his evil ways and cancels Cordelia's execution in the prison. He says: Some good I mean to do, Despite of mine own nature. Quickly send, Be brief in it, to the castle; for my writls on the life of Lear and on Cordelia: Nay, send in time. (V, iii, 243-247) Edmund reinforces the ordered rules of conscience, spurning his previous chaotic, amoral view in favor of doing "some good." Additionally, with his instructions to "be brief in it" and "send in time," Edmund proves that his concern for Cordelia and Lear is great, which in turn demonstrates sincere compunction. This understandable display of remorse seems to the audience to be the final step in reversing past transgressions and reestablishing order in the kingdom. Nearly momentarily, however, the

building anticipation of Lear's and Cordelia's triumph is shattered when Lear reenters the stage carrying his daughter's corpse. Lear's initial monologue upon returning with Cordelia's body demonstrates the pervading lack of order in his kingdom. He laments: Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones: Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them soThat heaven's vault should crack. She's gone forever! I know when one is dead, and when one lives; She's dead as earth. (V, iii, 257-261)He starts by repeating four times the word " howl," an animalistic word demonstrating the lack of humanity ~~and~~ the order of conscience ~~and~~ in the kingdom. Additionally, the absence of a traditional sentence structure in this first line echoes the absence of a traditional political or moral structure around him. Next, he attacks the men in his presence, calling them inhuman " men of stones" ~~and~~ again, lacking the order of conscience. Having criticized mortals, Lear then condemns " heaven's vault," wishing that it would " crack," for allowing such chaos to reign. In this way, Lear continues to hold on to his prior ideas of divine justice, but deeming the divine guilty for not having imposed justice in Cordelia's case. Finally, Lear grasps at the only order that remains in his chaotic kingdom: the order of life and death. He asserts that, if nothing else, he can still " know when one is dead, and when one lives"; most readers, however, would define a world where life and death are the only constants as being in a state of chaos. Thus, while Lear begins with pessimism, emphasizing the lack of human order, eventually he resorts to self-delusional optimism, stressing the only system of order that remains: biology. The sharpness of this drop from hope to despair intensifies the audience's perception of the battle between order and chaos in the play. The

magnitude of Cordelia's death is increased by the element of surprise, as well as by the complete turnaround of the play's mood. For this reason, we must consider Shakespeare's tactics to be successful ones, as they heighten the tragedy of King Lear, moving away from more traditional, more conservative methods in favor of abruptness, an ambush of the audience's emotions. After this critical moment, Shakespeare adds little else; Lear and Edmund both die, but the audience expects both of these events. Otherwise, we are left with Albany, Edgar and Kent standing alone on the stage, struggling to make sense ~~of~~ order ~~of~~ of the chaotic madness that has unfolded. Although Albany offers the throne to Kent and Edgar, the chaos never seems truly resolved. Kent rejects the throne, revealing that he is not long for the world, while Edgar appears to be, like the audience, in a state of shock. He says, " We that are young / Shall never see so much" (V, iii, 326-327), expressing his and our disbelief at the tremendous pain encountered by Lear. The audience receives nothing from Shakespeare but a few moments to share in the characters' pain, and the play ends. In this way, King Lear should be seen as a deeply pessimistic work, which Shakespeare chooses to conclude with an almost overpowering sense of hopelessness. There is, however, a bit of hope remaining, in that the remaining characters all believe in the power of order. Thus, if and when they do rebuild the kingdom, it appears that they will do so upon the foundation of moral and legal order. Lear's and Edgar's prophecies have come true; chaos has destroyed itself. Unfortunately, it has destroyed an ordered kingdom as well.