

# NATURE AND DIVINE DISPENSATION IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *KING LEAR*: A CRITICAL STUDY

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**Abstract:** King Lear, a typical Shakespearean tragedy, an acclaimed piece of high artistic expression, though unarguably opposing the rules and decorum laid down by the masters of Classical tragedy, frames its cornerstone upon the complex system of what the Elizabethan England considered as the Great Chain of Being, the law, harmony, and order in Nature, the bond between human behavior and natural order, uncontrollable elemental forces, elements of the natural world, the stars and their influences on the human nature, man-cosmos conflicts and so forth. It incorporates the disruption of the bond of harmony, law and order existing between the Nature and human world, the tragic consequences of violating the natural order functioning both in the human nature and human society, the cosmos, and of succumbing to the new Nature manifesting chaos, wild and unnatural human behavioral patterns. It is woven around the backgrounding of the human faculty of reason and the foregrounding of warm, wild passion. It is not only concerned with how Lear arrived at an imprudent decision on the spur of a moment during dividing his kingdom which entailed his tragic doom later, but also the harrowing events befallen to Gloucester owing to violating the natural order in the form of adultery. It attempts to project the nature of love, greed, lust, cruelty, the decay and fall of the world under the garb of the education and purification of Lear and turmoil in his kingdom, the complexities of Divine Dispensation, the double-ness of Nature in its dealings with human affairs which reflects the double-ness of human nature too.

The present paper shall analyze critically how the natural harmony, law, order collapse in the kingdom of an aged monarch, Lear, and create an unprecedented tragic consequences leading to damage of the whole fabric of the Good. It will touch upon the major tragic concerns of the play while dwelling upon the problem of Divine Dispensation. That is to say, commenting upon the nature of the Gods in dealing with the excruciating sufferings meted out to the innocent human beings, the paper shall focus on the complete network of evils which cause the breakdown of the natural functioning of the human world. It will analyze the controversial question of whether the Gods in the play King Lear are benevolent or malevolent, cruel or merciful, just or unjust, good or bad, benign or malign, destructive or constructive in their judgments as the injustices prevail in Lear's Kingdom.

**Keywords:** Nature, order, new Nature, reason, passion, Divine Dispensation.

*King Lear* is a typical Elizabethan tragedy written by William Shakespeare. It is an extremely complicated play that pivots around some broader Metaphysical aspects still debated by literary scholars. It centres on the excruciating pains, trials, and tribulations befallen to two families—the family of King Lear on the one hand, and that of Gloucester on the other—which more or less succumb to confused love, rash judgments, intellectual blindness, appearance, wild passion, conspiracy, cruelty, betrayal, anger, greed, and lust causing fissures in the fabric of natural laws functioning in the human world as well as in the natural world, constituting the parallels between the main plot and the subplot of the play, professing at the same time the consistency of the ways of the Eternal Providence to men. The love-contest, at the beginning of the play, unlocks the tragic and unnatural forebodings that ultimately cost almost all the lives of the members of the two noble families and it insinuates the intellectual infertility Lear demonstrates even though governed his Kingdom till he attained old age. In essence, the contest, being a metaphorical projection of Lear's mental conflicts about life and its potential buffetings, is the only key that initiates a chain of tragic consequences in the play, exploring the complexities of human nature even in the occasion of demonstrating filial duties, but specifically bringing to the fore the psychological position of a senile monarch, both his fears of senility and urges for quenching *internal need*, his need for love, care, respect, obedience, recognition, something that haunt every human being reaching the last phases of his life.

King Lear, in the presence of his daughters, and Albany, Cornwall, and other attendants, professes to “disengage” himself from his “long toil of state”, and foolishly puts his daughters to a test like which of the three loves him the most, resolving to place “largest bounty with the largest merit.” Lear eventually falls prey to the flattery, sycophantic words of love pronounced by Goneril and Regan, symbolically representing appearance, falsehood and hypocrisy; and proves himself intellectually blind in not fathoming the “true” love of

immaculate Cordelia, symbolizing truth, serenity, love, obedience and forgiveness. Goneril cannot even translate her affected love into words: "A love that make breath poor and speech unable / Beyond all manner of so much I love you" (1.1.60-61). Regan follows her sister's footsteps saying insincerely: "I find she names my very deed of love / Only she comes too short" (1.1.71-72). While Cordelia, who does not know the art of dissembling, immediately evidences her honesty, immaculate nature, and sincere devotion to filial duties uttering thus: "Unhappy that I am, I can't heave / My heart into my mouth." (1.1. 91-92).

The play in question brings to focus the sound relationship existing between Nature and the characters' behavior, actions in the Lear-Universe. When the natural balance between the human behavior and the mother Nature is upset, then there is an unprecedented chaos in Lear's kingdom embodying the human society; when the characters in the play frustrate the eternal laws of nature through their unnatural activities, then there is a fierce repercussion in the natural world too. It constitutes the central problem of the tragedy— the conflicts between the natural world and the human world which apparently render human beings as stranded and helpless victims in the hands of Nature. The idea of 'nature' is first brought in by Cordelia, who, on being enquired by her father as to the degree of her filial love for him, responds that she loves him "According to my bond, no more nor less" (1.1.93) suggesting her love as founded on the laws of nature which Lear anticipates to be shown but in fact fails to recognize. It is Lear who first shatters the natural father-daughter bond by disowning Cordelia on the spur of a moment engendering disorders in Nature which in turn engulf the lives of the entire family: "Here I disclaim all my paternal care / Propinquity and property of blood" (1.1.114-15). Ironically, when Lear is treated outrageously by Goneril, he expresses his anticipation that Regan, unlike Goneril, knows better "the offices of nature, bond of childhood" (2.2.367), the sense which is echoed in the very words of Cordelia. It is very much transparent that Lear has misdirected his intelligence here under the influence of his own internalized value-system which conceives the bond between father and daughter rather as stable legal bond than a natural bond of love; consequently Lear suffers intolerable treatment in the hands of his other two horrible daughters, namely Goneril and Regan whom he, out of lack of insight, assumed sincere, obedient and loving. Lear, later on in the play, recognizes his imprudence in believing the cruel monsters as loving mothers and pushing a Christ-like figure Cordelia into the background of exile and disappointment: "O most small fault / How ugly didst thou in Cordelia show / Which, like an engine, wrenched my frame of nature / From the fixed place" (1.4.258-61). This thoughtless and imprudent behavior on the part of an experienced king is rare and a manifest violation of the laws of nature. This is the beginning of chaos in the society leading ultimately to the disorder and death.

Precisely speaking, the first scene of *King Lear*, which is the genesis of the whole tragedy, is entirely absurd and unbelievable for mere verbal profession of love, which cannot be measured be it sincere or hollow as Lear himself proves, must not be a standard of dividing the entire kingdom. It is not what A.C. Bradley exactly maintains: "The oft-repeated judgement that the first scene of King Lear is absurdly improbable, and that no sane man would think of dividing his Kingdom among his daughters in proportion to the strength of their several protestations of love, is much too harsh and is based upon a strange misunderstanding" (202). But still, the play leaves in its wake a profound message for the readers to embrace – that is the virtue of being humble and patient that are in diametric opposition to Lear's character. Therefore, Lear requires education and purification through pain and sufferings – a pure Christian theological doctrine, to curtail his previously demonstrated irrationalities. R. V. Young rightly observes thus: "King Lear may be understood as a profoundly Christian vision of human reality unfolding in a decidedly non-Christian setting among pagan character" (253-54).

Goneril and Regan are no less transgressors of natural laws than other characters as far as their appearance is concerned and not surprisingly, both of them contribute equally to trigger the tragic foreboding of the play by not selfishly meddling in the misunderstanding between Lear and angelic Cordelia. To be more precise, their taking recourse to pretension, hypocrisy, and deception with a view to impressing Lear is itself an act violating the natural order of laws functioning in the human world. That if they negotiate the matter with Lear to resolve the dispute, on the part of Cordelia, they may lose the race of inheriting paternal property is not beyond the purview of their apprehension.

Besides, they do not fulfill their natural filial obligations, when Lear comes to them to stay alternately, instead treat him with cruelty and disrespect, stripping him of his remaining authority and power, which entails retributive punishment in the hands of Fate. A. C. Bradley wrongly points out that the cardinal cause of Lear's failure in the process of dividing his kingdom on the basis of the speeches of the daughters is "not that Goneril and Regan were exceptionally hypocritical, but that Cordelia was exceptionally sincere and unbending" (202). G. Wilson Knight rightly observes thus:

"Apart from Lear, the protagonist, and Gloucester, his shadow, the subsidiary dramatic persons fall naturally into two parties, good and bad. First, we have Cordelia, France, Albany, Kent, the Fool, and Edgar.

Second Goneril, Regan, Burgundy, Cornwall, Oswald, and Edmund.

The exact balance is curious. It will scarcely be questioned that the first party tend to enlist, and the second to repel, our ethical sympathies in so far as ethical sympathies are here roused in us. But none are wholly good or bad, excepting perhaps Cordelia and Cornwall” (201).

Cordelia by no means be accused of violating the natural order of laws, since she retains her uprightness throughout the play, upholding the values of humility, patience, and forgiveness achieving Christ-like position at the end of the play. Paul N. Siegel points out that Cordelia’s ignominious death draws an “analogy between Cordelia and Christ, who redeemed human nature from the curse brought on it by Adam and Eve, is made unmistakable, although not crudely explicit...” (186). Cordelia is the only figure in the play that is wholly upright and morally sound. Huston Diehl remarks in this regard that “Lear’s evil daughters Goneril and Regan give a perfectly calibrated, but entirely hypocritical, performance at the abduction ceremony, while Cordelia, the child who truly loves her father, is unable, or unwilling, to perform the role of the obsequious daughter even though she knows that playing such a part will guarantee her inheritance” (99).

Likewise, Gloucester, in the subplot, violates the laws of nature by committing adultery, an action which entails his expiation at the concluding part of the play in the form of losing eyes in the hands of Cornwall and Goneril. . Much like Lear, Gloucester proves himself imprudent in not seeing the true nature of his illegitimate son, Edmund, and the true nature of his legitimate son, Edgar. Gloucester regards both Edgar and Edmund as not equal: “but I have a son, sir, by order of law, some year elder than this, who yet is no dearer in my account” (1.1.18-19) but later on in the play Gloucester, falling prey to Edmund’s conspiracies, turns against his natural son, Edgar, and proclaims his illegitimate son, Edmund to be his natural boy (2.1.84). In the subplot, the natural order of laws is transgressed by Edmund, the diabolical villain in the play, and by Gloucester to a lesser degree. Gloucester receives a mortal punishment in the form of losing his eyes and expiates his grave sins before his expiry. And Edmund turns the natural order of Gloucester’s family upside down, questioning his deprived social position as a bastard son, keeping no trust in the natural laws that he assumes to be ‘the plague of custom’ and ‘curiosity of the nation’, endorsing his own wild baser drives as the new Natural laws. His invoking the goddess of Nature which is not conventionally considered as the true Nature, whom he dubs as “dull, stale, and tired bed”, evidences his secret attitudes towards the Natural laws as artificial constraints imposed upon society. In a soliloquy, he gives vent to his views of established social laws thus:

“Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law  
My services are bound. Wherefore should I  
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit  
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,  
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines  
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base?” (1.2.1-6)

G. Wilson Knight precisely remarks about Edmund thus: “He recognizes no fate, but only free will. It is ‘the excellent foppery of the world’ to put faith in the ruling of the stars, of destiny, or believe in any gods. Man is what he is, by his own choice...” (211-12). Edmund violates natural laws in deceiving his father and step-brother, Edgar that ultimately took his father’s life and himself met a fatal ending. However, the play from the beginning to the end projects an intimate association between the natural world and the human world. When the characters, out of whims and caprices, act against the laws of nature, then there is a disorder in the natural world which may be interpreted as a form of divine warning to man. For instance, Lear’s violating the natural order of laws by disclaiming Cordelia culminates in the appearance of a fierce storm. The storm serves as a symbol of Lear’s insanity for before losing his mind, Lear establishes a bond between himself and nature in the pronouncement: “O let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven! / Keep me in temper, I would not be mad” (1.5.43-45). When Lear is exposed to storm, Kent makes a laborious attempt to move Lear to a shelter. But Lear seems to be unaffected by the external natural upheavals and asserts thus: “This tempest in my mind / Doth from my senses take all feeling else” (3.4.12-13). Lear through his madness attains a valuable moral vision of life and achieves “Redemption”.

One of the most significant aspects of *King Lear* is the Pattern of Divine Dispensation which constitutes the central Metaphysical metaphor of the play. Besides, Shakespeare’s tragedies in many ways, apart from being preoccupied with the social, moral, spiritual, ethical, and psychological aspects of human life, focus specifically on the broader aspects of Metaphysical issues, which are in fact unintelligible to be addressed in crystal clear terms. One of the recurring themes of the play is the nature of Divine Justice in the human world. It presents the existence of man in a place, they say, where the presence and interference of God in human affairs is foreign. The play has been variously interpreted like it is the manifesto of Renaissance questioning and misgiving which in essence produced, in my estimation, to a considerable extent, the misconceptions that the Gods are entirely

malevolent and distant, remote caring not a farthing the sufferings of innocent human beings. That the play bears at the heart of its contentions a material proof of the existence of the life hereafter, where the Eternal Justice makes both disinterested and true judgement, is undeniably true and the callousness in hanging innocent Christ-like figure Cordelia corroborates the view. Some critics like Bradley, Kott, and Everett approach the play with agonistic bent of mind and opine the Gods in the play as being unjust, and malign in nature; while some others like Knight, Heilman, belonging to 'Christian School' maintain that the ways of God to men are just. To comprehend well the play's major focus on the patterns of divine justice is but to do justice to its message not explicitly projected; and probably it is the high art which makes the readers determine its message rather than to profess overtly.

Though the play does not lack improbable situations, it is definitely implausible to consider the Gods in King Lear as unjust; besides, questioning the nature of the Gods is illogical too. It is absolutely a matter of Free-Will. The characters in the play are perform not cognizant of the fact that human beings are the only creation which has the power to exercise Free-Will. We can render this planet a place of peace and happiness if we believe in the natural virtues of the human beings such as Truthfulness, Humility and Forgiveness. God has fashioned Eternal Laws to be observed properly and undoubtedly we can follow those laws to achieve peaceful life or we can exercise our Free-Will to violate those laws even though we know that violating those laws may cause dire consequences. Observing the natural laws is the sole security key of peace and happiness and if we make a mess of those eternal laws to bring chaos, forgetting our Rational Power, we are to blame ourselves, not God or the Gods as in the play. We have two options — one to follow the natural order of laws, the other being to transgress those laws; Choice is in our hands, but if we pick out the second option, we have to JUSTIFY our choice since we are Rational beings by nature. When we have the power to ward off evils, we must exercise it. This view of mine can be applied to the play for what most of the characters do is but an expression of irrationalities, an act of transgression. To put more simply, their sufferings are an outcome of what they have done. The idea is like the following:

“...his is the excellent foppery of the world,  
that, when we are sick in fortune—often the surfeit  
of our own behavior,—we make guilty of our disasters  
the sun, the moon, and the stars: as if we were villains  
by necessity; fools by heavenly compulsion; knaves,  
thieves, and treachers, by spherical predominance” (1.2.114-119).

When Lear disowns Cordelia swearing by “the sacred radiance of the sun / The mysteries of Hecate and the night / By all the operations of the orbs” (1.1.110-12), Kent asks him to “see better” (1.1.160) in the natural order of things; but he does not change his obstinacy and remarks thus: “The bow is bent and drawn; make from the shaft” (1.1.144). Kent is sure of Lear's succumbing to evil: “I'll tell thee thou dost evil” (1.1.167). Lear makes a mess of intellectual deficiency, stubbornness, stupidity, arrogance and he suffers for it accordingly. The Fool's comments on Lear's vices and follies provide clues about the transgression of the natural moral order: “So out went the candle and we were left darkling” (1.4.208). Lear does believe in the benevolent nature of the Gods and knows that the Nature is the eternal order, an ideal framework for human behavior, but still he acts unreasonably. Gloucester observes on Lear's stupidity thus: “The King falls from bias of nature—there's father against child” (1.2.111). Elton maintains that by “violating the natural moral and Stoic virtues of prudence, justice, and temperance, Lear transgresses the prudence by which one governs oneself ( bonum proprium) as well as the prudence by which one governs others ( bonum commune)” (79).

Likewise, the Earl of Gloucester's actions show his violating the natural order of laws in committing adultery, in fathering Edmund and his not feeling repentant is an emblem of “brazen” conscience. He superstitiously associates the discord in relationships, the breach of bond between father and son, the disharmony in the kingdom, the mutinies in cities, the falling out between countries and so forth with “late eclipses in the sun and moon” (1.2. 103). His parochial attitudes do not allow him to see the truth and so he regards Edmund as his natural loyal boy and assumes Edgar as villainous, with the result Edmund deceives him. He commits lechery, and treason for the sake of Lear, and loses his eyes in the hands of Cornwall, makes an attempt to commit suicide in despair frustrating the will of the Gods renouncing life, and implausibly blames the Gods as cruel and merciless: “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods / They kill us for their sport” (4.1. 37-38).

He never sees the wrongs that he has done to himself and makes the Gods responsible for his tribulations. Edgar in this regard explicitly observes thus: “The gods are just and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us” (5.3. 168-69). When human beings overreach themselves, divine punishment is imminent. H. Yahya has given, in his illuminating work “*Perished Nations*”, fair details of all the past nations that were punished vehemently and destroyed by God owing to their perversions in all spheres of life, for their violating natural



order of Divine laws. Yahya maintains that: “Having perished because of their (those nations’) rebellion against God and their rejection of His commands (the Natural Laws), those communities reveal to us how weak and impotent mankind is with respect to God” (8).

Edmund makes a direct rebellion against the laws of Nature and meets fatal blows from Edgar. Cornwall brutally pulls out Gloucester’s eyes from his sockets instead of FORGIVING him and receives a fatal deathblow at the hands of his own servant. Albany remarks with shocking affirmation: “This shows you are above / You justicers, that these our nether crimes / So speedily can venge” (4.2.79-81). Goneril poisons Regan to death out of jealousy and she in turns commits suicide by stabbing herself. Both the sisters rejected filial gratitude and showed “filial ingratitude” in dealing with their old father, and they too could not escape the wrath of the Gods. The play leaves indeed an illuminating message that if we do not obey the commandments of the Gods or God, and indulge in perversions, our doom is lurking to devour us. Lady Macbeth violated natural laws and persuaded her spouse to murder their King, Duncan and met an egregious end.

If we argue from the viewpoint of dramatic context, we have evidences of the mercy and justice of the Gods in human predicaments —some people make efforts to help Lear and Kent in their perils, Kent and Gloucester go to take Lear to a ‘hovel’ in the storm scene, Albany’s determination to retaliate the brutal blinding of Gloucester, Edgar saves his father though treated abhorrently, Cordelia decides to wage war with the wicked to bring back her father’s kingdom. To conclude, Huston Diehl comments that the questions— what role do the Gods play in the human affairs? Are there supernatural forces that regulate the human world, or is misfortune solely the outcome of individual actions? Are there ‘natural’ ties between children and parents or are human beings by nature appetitive and motivated by self-interest? Is any faith in a moral order, a merciful God, or a natural goodness a mere delusion? — assumed a great resolution in the years immediately following the Protestant Reformation in English Elizabethan world (95). All these questionings are considerably the product of misconceptions of the theologically ignorant people of Post-Reformation Elizabethan world. Considering the Gods as cruel, malign, unjust, destructive, malevolent is but the product of misconceptions that find expression in the minds of those who shut their conscience from the divine Truth. *The Holy Bible* says in clear terms: “Evil men understand not Justice: but they that seek the Lord understand all *things*” (Proverbs 28:5); “And therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of Justice; blessed are all those who wait for him” (Isa. 30:18).

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