

Shakespeare and the Law of Nature

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There are several aspects of Shakespeare that have been rather neglected or forgotten in recent times. One such aspect is the subtle biblical symbolism that runs alongside the Platonic symbolism, most especially in the love comedies. Our age is no longer in contact with the highly complex spiritual reading of Scripture that was foundational to theology in the Middle Ages and to the highest learning in both the universities and monasteries.

Owing to the loss of connection with this tradition, save now perhaps only in the Christian monasteries, the 'cosmos' in which Shakespeare's plays unfold, and which is central to their action, has become invisible to the modern audience and actor. It is not simply that the gods or different psychic powers have vanished from the modern world-view, but also that the kind of world in which such divinities and demons exist has also vanished. The various planes of reality with which Shakespeare is concerned have become invisible in our age.

Consequently, figures such as the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth*, or the wild elements in *King Lear*, or the Fate that Hamlet feels calls him, no longer signify what they did to the Elizabethan mind, or indeed to the long tradition of symbolic sense that Shakespeare calls upon.

A difficulty that confronts the interpreter of our age is the objectification of the cosmos into a blind and purposeless machine. This objectification of the cosmos is coupled with a 'subjectification' of the divine or the meaningful. The Cartesian split between perceived and perceiver prevails, and so meaning in Shakespeare, and in art generally, is sought only within the private consciousness of the individual. Thus, as we often hear, art is now said to mean 'whatever it means to me'. In traditional terms this is not meaning at all. Meaning is what things disclose out of themselves when seen with a pure mind and heart. For Shakespeare, and for Edmund Spenser, for the English Miracle Plays, and for the Arthurian legends, the 'art' of these creations was meant to serve as a way of glimpsing the meaning of things which the wise and pure of heart could see. What we might call the 'religious' way of seeing the world about us has been lost.

Along with the objectification of the cosmos and reducing it to a blind machine the human realm has been divorced from the providential order of the universe. The world about Shakespeare's protagonists has become simply 'scenery' or 'dramatic

effect', or else a projection of the subjectivity of the characters. We find this approach well underway in the Victorian interpretations of Shakespeare, for example in Bradley, where all the 'drama' lies in the conflicts or flaws within the protagonists, where conflict is exclusively inner conflict. In this kind of interpretation of Shakespeare, the cosmos vanishes. There is no 'world' in which events have ultimate consequences. So, for example, when Cleopatra dies by the snake bite and Anthony upon his sword, the modern audience, preoccupied with their passion-filled lives, easily miss what this signifies for the two realms of Egypt and Rome, and indeed how it signifies the fall and passing of both empires.

This loss of 'world' of our age may be quite clearly seen in much modern drama. In the popular soap operas there is no 'cosmos' in which the drama is unfolding. The world, or even the street, is just scenery about the shapeless inner lives and emotions of the characters. And the characters are just that, just characters. They have no role in the cosmos, nor any call to great deeds, either good or evil. Nothing is at stake beyond the private individual, and so no resolution is required. Instead there are just social issues. In the classical sense, there is really no drama at all.

Having said all this, it remains that the plays of Shakespeare still have a powerful effect upon us, and in a sense have not really become incomprehensible. I would suggest that this is because our human nature is the same as it always was, so that in spite of the profoundly limited view of the cosmos that prevails, the human soul still knows itself to be part of the fabric of the great whole.

In Platonic terms, the soul has a memory of the divine world it originated in and it naturally desires to return there as its home. Through this memory it has glimpses of the divine shining through the world of sense, and these glimpses calls it home. Out of this single idea the whole Renaissance philosophy of Beauty emerged and took form in the arts. And this remains a major key to Shakespeare, especially the Sonnets and romantic comedies.

Or in Christian terms, the soul is made in the image of God and its knowing and willing powers seek a correspondence with the eternal knowing and willing in the mind of God. It yearns to know things and participate in the truth of things as God knows them and participates in them, and they in God. There is a strand of Christian mysticism that runs through the Sonnets, taking up the very sensual symbolism of the *Song of Songs* which became the focus of a vast mystical literature in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, particularly in St Bernard of Clairvaux and Hugh of St Victor. It is not that, for the mystics, the sensual realm is turned into an allegory of the pure spiritual realm – a crude way of interpreting allegory. Rather the sensual realm is seen in its fullness, as filled with divinity. So it is also for

Shakespeare. He restores allegory to its proper function as showing a continuum between the sensory and the spiritual. The world by its very nature has layers or levels of meaning, all real and all present at once.

But this understanding had faded, and by the time of the Late Middle Ages the poets had reduced allegory to a set of conventions where one thing merely stood for another. Similarly, the fourfold biblical interpretation of levels of Scriptural meaning became a formulaic convention and divorced from the contemplative practice it originated in that ascended through the four senses. Later one sees the rise of occultism, where allegory then becomes a convention of veils *concealing things*, rather than revealing things. One can trace in these shifts how the world of real things gradually ceased to be revealing or manifesting meaning, thus paving the way for the rise of the reductive sciences which stripped away any notion of things disclosing truth or meaning out of their simple presence. As modern materialism arose, so the human faculties lost their perception of what the Book of Nature disclosed, and which it existed to disclose. The romantic movement arose in opposition to this, but with little effect beyond the arts.

Nevertheless, the works of art created from this perception of things, as also the Scriptures, still touch us and can indeed change how we see. The poetic and symbolic perception of the world belongs to human nature, even though we have lost the way to reflect upon it. An example is Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, in which a vast 'cosmos' suddenly sprang to view again, in which events have implications for the whole of Middle Earth and over great expanses of time. Yet, as T. A. Shippey points out in *The Road to Middle Earth*, this completely puzzled the 'literati' who were lost to the tradition in which names and places had meaning, and 'events' were shaped by higher powers than mere human will. For the modern materialist the 'seeds of time' that Macbeth perilously sought to grasp and pinned his vain hopes to simply do not exist. There are no dangers in peering into the fates. Indeed, there are no fates for modernism. The only perilous forces remaining are the dark forces of the private psyche. No longer fearing the gods or the laws of the cosmos, or providential justice, modern man winds up fearing his own soul and finding himself perpetually at the mercy of inner conflicts. And so modern drama, from the soap operas to the Ibsen, tends to portray 'worldless' souls wandering aimlessly hither and thither.

There are clues in the texts of Shakespeare, however, if we attend to them carefully and resist the temptation to paraphrase his words. Having run seminars on Shakespeare for almost twenty years the biggest problem to overcome is the habit of students paraphrasing, of translating Shakespeare into modern terms. To take a

simple example, here is the opening of *Hamlet*, where the guards are keeping their night watch:

BERNARDO

Who's there?

FRANCISCO

Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself.

BERNARDO

Long live the king!

FRANCISCO

Bernardo?

BERNARDO

He.

FRANCISCO

You come most carefully upon your hour.

BERNARDO

'Tis now struck twelve; get thee to bed, Francisco.

FRANCISCO

For this relief much thanks: 'tis bitter cold,
And I am sick at heart.

Now it would be quite easy to take this opening as mere 'preparation' for Hamlet coming on the scene and the apparition of the Ghost. But that would be to miss what it is in itself. We are made to wonder what peril makes the guards so nervous and even unsure of one another. This is what lies behind Bernardo's question "Who's there?" and Francisco's untrusting response "Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself". Thus both demand disclosure. Bernardo's answer is most important: "Long live the King".

How is that 'unfolding himself'? Why not simply say his name? But he does not, and Francisco only recognizes him by his allegiance to the King, and then can name him. Who Francisco and Bernard are is given to us in what they serve, the King, and through the King, Denmark. This is really important. Shakespeare, when

introducing characters to us, reveals them through where they stand in the order of things, and through what they serve. Bernardo is 'unfolded', disclosed, through what his heart is set on and governed by. Yet Francisco is cold and "sick at heart". His watch has been troubled and some strange foreboding unsettles his heart.

But we ask, why is this so hard to declare? It is because some peril lies towards the King, which we later learn is Fortinbras, and so the darkness of the night, the lateness of the hour, the questioning of who one is and where one's allegiance stands are all fused together in the initial words of these two guards. They are part of some great shadow in the fate of Denmark which does not 'unfold itself' to clear sight, but lies hidden from view, a secret working a slow poisoning in the state of Denmark. What Denmark stands for, the good order it is renowned for, the long peace King Hamlet had established before his brother Claudius usurped the crown, is now insecure and in danger of falling under the aimless adventures of wild Fortinbras, "prick'd on by a most emulate pride". So the words "Long live the King" stand in bleak contrast to the chaos heralded by the "emulate pride" of Fortinbras. An order of things is about to topple. Indeed, something is already greatly amiss, something *within* Denmark that opens the door to this danger without. And this is what Hamlet is confronted with, the fate of Denmark, the fall of a kingdom.

Once we pick up how the lives of all the other characters in the play are bound up with the fate of Denmark – the death of Polonius and his son Laertes, the madness of Ophelia, of Hamlet's corrupted companions Guildenstern and Rosencrantz – we see how Shakespeare weaves his characters into a cosmos in which the great order of things shapes the destinies of all. What each character is, is disclosed in how they confront and respond to the world and circumstances they find themselves within. Indeed, how they meet it, either nobly or wickedly, or even indifferently as Falstaff does, is what most interests Shakespeare. His characters are entirely disclosed in their actions, in their allegiances, in what they set their hearts on or hold to be of greatest value. And so their actions reveal the way they apprehend the world and their part in it.

It is for this reason that we have the civil hierarchy in each play, because the civil hierarchy is a mirror of the cosmic hierarchy. What each person is, is what they stand for in the hierarchical order of things, both socially and cosmically. The modern critics who see only a reflection of historical class systems in Shakespeare miss the point. Shakespeare is not the least interested in social comment, which has nothing to do with the purpose of art. It is perhaps worth reminding ourselves of the proper meaning of the word 'hierarchy'. 'Hier' refers to divinity, while 'archy' means first principle or ruling order. Simply speaking, hierarchy refers to the divine order of the universe, where everything stands in its proper relation to the divine

creator. It is the providential order of all things oriented towards divine perfection. Its opposite is chaos or dissolution – ‘anarchy’. Human society is a natural image of this hierarchical order, with each function in its proper station in reference to the whole. So when this natural order, which reflects the divine order of the cosmos, is disrupted, chaos and confusion follow. Perhaps the clearest presentation in Shakespeare of this natural order is to be found in Ulysses’ ‘degree’ speech in *Troilus and Cressida*: (read part)

ULYSSES

The heavens themselves, the planets and this centre
Observe degree, priority and place,
Insisture, course, proportion, season, form,
Office and custom, in all line of order;
And therefore is the glorious planet Sol
In noble eminence enthroned and sphered
Amidst the other; whose medicinal eye
Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil,
And posts, like the commandment of a king,
Sans cheque to good and bad: but when the planets
In evil mixture to disorder wander,
What plagues and what portents! what mutiny!
What raging of the sea! shaking of earth!
Commotion in the winds! frights, changes, horrors,
Divert and crack, rend and deracinate
The unity and married calm of states
Quite from their fixure! O, when degree is shaken,
Which is the ladder to all high designs,
Then enterprise is sick! How could communities,
(*Troilus and Cressida* Act I, Scene III)

When we consider what Claudius has done in murdering King Hamlet, or what Macbeth has done in usurping the crown of Duncan, or indeed when Lear relieves himself of the responsibilities of the crown, these lines from *Troilus and Cressida* are most apt:

Take but degree away, untune that string,
And, hark, what discord follows! each thing meets
In mere oppugnancy: the bounded waters
Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores
And make a sop of all this solid globe:

Strength should be lord of imbecility,
And the rude son should strike his father dead:
Force should be right; or rather, right and wrong,
Between whose endless jar justice resides,
Should lose their names, and so should justice too.
Then every thing includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into appetite;
And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make performe an universal prey,
And last eat up himself.

A city, a nation, a kingdom, hold to their nature so long as degree or hierarchical rank prevails. But when degree is taken away, justice, providence and grace vanish from the affairs of state, while loyalty, honour, trust and constancy vanish from the human heart or “lose their names”. Concord is replaced by oppugnancy – antagonism between all parts.

In *Hamlet* we see these qualities which bind Denmark together gradually erode, until finally Fortinbras may simply walk into Denmark and take it without raising his sword. In *Macbeth* the reign of chaos is sudden. The order of nature is disrupted immediately upon the murder of Duncan. Not only has Macbeth murdered King Duncan in his desire to rule Scotland, he has abused the trust of a guest in his home. Since ancient times, the abuse of a guest has been held to be one of the greatest crimes. In Dante such hosts are sent to a lower circle of Hell, while Plato says in the *Laws* that the gods take special vengeance on such conduct.

To put this briefly, to break or mar the order of the kingdom invokes forces in Nature to rise up and cleanse the kingdom of its disease. Nature will restore herself, either through a fall from a Golden Age to a Silver, or Bronze to Iron, as appears to be the case in *Hamlet* or *King Lear*. Or else a higher order of Grace is brought about, as happens in Malcolm’s the closing speech in *Macbeth*.

MALCOLM

We shall not spend a large expense of time
Before we reckon with your several loves,
And make us even with you. My thanes and kinsmen,
Henceforth be earls, the first that ever Scotland
In such an honour named. What's more to do,
Which would be planted newly with the time,

As calling home our exiled friends abroad
That fled the snares of watchful tyranny;
Producing forth the cruel ministers
Of this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen,
Who, as 'tis thought, by self and violent hands
Took off her life; this, and what needful else
That calls upon us, by the grace of Grace,
We will perform in measure, time and place:
So, thanks to all at once and to each one,
Whom we invite to see us crown'd at Scone.

(*Macbeth* Act V, scene viii)

Or again, the order of two kingdoms is wiped out to be replaced by an entirely new order, as in *Anthony and Cleopatra*. In that play, Egypt and Rome each fall from their proper order. The kingdom of Egypt is founded on prophecy and divination. Its rule springs from interpreting the signs from heaven. And so we see, at the beginning of the play, the trivial abuses that astrology is put to, mirroring the fickleness of Cleopatra. While in Rome, which is ruled by the warrior code of honour, we see Anthony break his vows time and again, and Caesar himself, while appearing to act for the good of Rome, is also deceitful and dishonourable. Two great kingdoms in decline, that is the cosmic background to the tumultuous love affair that ultimately destroys Anthony and Cleopatra. They each defeat themselves. Think again of the closing words of the speech of Ulysses:

Then every thing includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into appetite;
And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last eat up himself.

It is a law-filled universe in which each of the plays are set. In the first scene of any tragedy or comedy we get a glimpse of the laws that are about to play themselves out. To put that another way, we witness how the main protagonists place themselves under certain laws through the choices they make, through what they dedicate themselves to. Behind all action lies a dedication, a commitment of the soul, and dedications place the soul under certain universal laws.

It is always revealing if we listen for the language of dedication. This is especially the case with the soliloquies. A modern audience might easily suppose Shakespeare's soliloquies are 'filling in the plot' or giving us an insight into the emotional state of

the characters. But this is to miss their real function. They are moments of decision, of weighing up which way to go, and concluded with a resolution or vow of some kind. Nor are they merely the ‘inner thoughts’ of the characters, but rather they are usually addressed to things outside – to the heavens, to the beloved, to Providence, to Fate, to Chaos, to defiance or mockery of the gods, or to ridicule of the heavenly order, as with Edmund’s soliloquy at the opening of Scene II in *King Lear*:

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 moon-shines
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? wherefore base?
When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous, and my shape as true,
As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us
With base? with baseness? bastardy? base, base?
Who, in the lusty stealth of nature, take
More composition and fierce quality
Than doth, within a dull, stale, tired bed,
Go to the creating a whole tribe of fops,
Got 'tween asleep and wake? Well, then,
Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land:
Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund
As to the legitimate: fine word,--legitimate!
Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed,
And my invention thrive, Edmund the base
Shall top the legitimate. I grow; I prosper:
Now, gods, stand up for bastards!
(*King Lear*, Act I, scene ii)

One wonders, on hearing this, which gods will “stand up for bastards” at Edmunds invocation. There is a clue, perhaps, at the beginning of the soliloquy:

Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom, . .

He contrasts ‘Nature’ with “the plague of custom”, which in his eyes is nothing more substantial than “The curiosity of nations”. He has split the cosmic order from the civil order, and by so doing ‘legitimized’ his illegitimacy. The ‘degrees’ that

Ulysses invokes are banished. In the same way, a little later, Edmund discounts the portents in the stars, which so disconcert Gloucester, as mere 'foppery'. For Edmund 'Nature' is not the providential order as tradition holds, but rather wild nature, disordered passion, ungoverned will, might over right. To this 'goddess' he dedicates himself, and we may be sure that, so long as he holds to this course, he will be led to his doom faithfully by that goddess. He has placed himself under her law – blindly, of course, just as Lear has done in the previous scene in placing himself under his two unfaithful daughters. It is Lear who sets all this in train, not through some wicked intent, but through supposing he could lay aside the responsibilities Nature and the civil order have laid upon him, and become, so to speak, outside all law. His subsequent battle with the elements follows lawfully from his unlawful abdication. And all his subsequent invocations to the gods, and indeed his curses, are all in vain. He must come to see what it is he has done. His crime is to have misjudged the truth of things. Edmund's action is like a reverse image of what Lear has done, yet both through breaking the lawful correlation between the cosmic and the civil order.

So far I have drawn illustrations from Shakespeare's tragedies. In a way the law of nature is rather more obvious in the tragedies because of the general chaos that ensues. The unfolding of the law is subtler in the comedies. Here quite another aspect of the cosmic law is made visible, which we may call the law as Grace. While the tragedies trace the consequences of action contrary to the law of Nature, resulting in disintegration and ruin, the comedies trace the *transformation* that comes about through action in accordance with the law of Nature. Again, while our central interest will naturally be with the main protagonists, the whole world of the play will be transformed along with the transformation of the protagonists.

A good way of grasping how this transformation takes place is to observe the nature of the obstacles that lie in the way of love fulfilling itself. Although we might see these obstacles as within the characters, they manifest in how they see the world about them and act, and in the circumstances of the world they are born into. The tragedy of Anthony and Cleopatra lies in their blatant disregard for the world about them. In the love comedies it is the other way round. Love will succeed only so long as it comes into a right relation with the whole of nature and society. This comes about through two processes: first, love must gain 'eyes', since at first it is blind, and second love must be infused with virtue, for without virtue it cannot bear fruit.

Here it is helpful to see how Shakespeare combines two traditions of love, the Platonic and the Christian. The tradition of love stemming from Plato is essentially 'contemplative' love, love that desires union with Absolute Beauty, and which transcends all mortal things, most clearly expressed in Socrates' final speech in the

Symposium This is a common theme of Renaissance art, especially music and poetry. The tradition of love stemming from Christianity, on the other hand, is essentially 'redemptive' love, love that is fulfilled in creative or sacrificial action. Each form of love has its own particular type of virtue, and these Shakespeare also draws together.

In the romantic comedies the Christian form of love very often performs its transformative work in disguise.

Perhaps the most famous example is Portia in the *Merchant of Venice* who disguises herself as a male lawyer in the court scene out of her love for Antonio. Through the 'higher law' of love she transforms the harsh justice of the law of Venice into transformative mercy, saving not only Antonio but redeeming Shylock too. Some commentators consider that obliging Shylock to become a Christian, as part of his sentence, is a kind of crude anti-Jewish propaganda. But that is not how it would be seen by a Renaissance audience, or indeed by a Medieval audience. Shakespeare is calling upon a long tradition that sees the New Testament – the New Law – as fulfilling the Old Testament – the Old Law. The Old Law is understood as pure Justice, and eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But under this law all are condemned – as Hamlet observes in talking to the Players who will perform the play within the play for him. The New Law transforms the law of Justice into the law of regeneration – the original good from whence it came. Hence Portia's famous speech, "the quality of mercy is not strained". Shylock finds himself trapped in the harsh logic of justice which he thought would work in his favour. Love, as creative mercy, is not Platonic. Yet Shakespeare so blends the Platonic and Christian forms of love that we cannot help but see them as but two aspects of one thing – the cosmic love that is the ultimate binding law of the universe, drawing all things towards mutual good, and perfecting the particular nature's of each thing.

In one way or another the lovers in the comedies are compelled to combine the two forms of love together. This is perhaps most easily seen in the early play *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. The play opens with Valentin saying farewell to his friend Proteus as he is off to explore the world, while Proteus remains at home doting in his love for Julia. Valentin gently mocks his friend for his foolishness, while the wide world calls for adventure. But, as we ought to expect with Shakespeare, Valentin who mocks the foolishness of love will soon find himself in love, while Proteus who desires to stay at home absorbed in books on love must venture into the world of action. Both run into trouble in their journey of love, and both have to learn specific virtues which they lack – one honour and the other constancy. But all is well finally through Julia disguising herself as a man and seeking Proteus, and on her journey befriending Silvia, and through their action together both Valentin and

Proteus are redeemed. Silvia embodies the Platonic aspect of love, the Beautiful, while Julia embodies the Christian aspect of love, redemptive action or goodness. And so the play ends with both parties being married, in “one marriage, and one feast”.

Often lovers must step outside the ‘city’, the ordinary world, and enter a desert or a forest in order to come under the new law of love. For example, lovers may elope from the city where love cannot flourish, as for example in *Romeo and Juliet*. Or lovers may be banished from the city to a forest as in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Here ‘higher powers’ of some kind will transform the unruly aspects of the protagonists, either by tests or trials, or through magical deities of nature. This aspect plays a large part in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, where the main transformative action takes place in the forest. The ‘city’ in this play is like the Old Law, where rule is by precedent and convention and out of accord with the higher law of Nature, while the forest is where the gods and demons play and work freely, not according to precedent but according to what transforms vision, gives eyes to love, reason to goodness, and speech to the heart. Here even the foolishness of love, the ignorance of the mechanicals, the frenzied eye of the poet, are all transformed into goodness, wisdom and delight.

Finally, perhaps the simplest way of seeing how the cosmic law governs the world of Shakespeare’s plays is through the law manifesting in a threefold hierarchy: as Grace, as Justice, and as Fate. These roughly correspond with the Medieval view of Heaven, Purgatory and Hell. But with Shakespeare we see how the main protagonists place themselves under one of these three planes of law through their choices. In one way or another, all three will be present in each play, though one will predominate and play itself out. We might say that for Shakespeare human freedom lies in the choice of which law to place oneself under, as distinct from the idea of freedom ushered in with the Age of Reason, in which freedom was conceived as power over nature. For Shakespeare such an idea of freedom removes man from his proper cosmic setting and makes for tyranny rather than divine concord and grace.

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ULYSSES

Troy, yet upon his basis, had been down,  
And the great Hector's sword had lack'd a master,  
But for these instances.  
The specialty of rule hath been neglected:  
And, look, how many Grecian tents do stand

Hollow upon this plain, so many hollow factions.  
When that the general is not like the hive  
To whom the foragers shall all repair,  
What honey is expected? Degree being vizarded,  
The unworthiest shows as fairly in the mask.  
The heavens themselves, the planets and this centre  
Observe degree, priority and place,  
Insisture, course, proportion, season, form,  
Office and custom, in all line of order;  
And therefore is the glorious planet Sol  
In noble eminence enthroned and sphered  
Amidst the other; whose medicinable eye  
Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil,  
And posts, like the commandment of a king,  
Sans cheque to good and bad: but when the planets  
In evil mixture to disorder wander,  
What plagues and what portents! what mutiny!  
What raging of the sea! shaking of earth!  
Commotion in the winds! frights, changes, horrors,  
Divert and crack, rend and deracinate  
The unity and married calm of states  
Quite from their fixure! O, when degree is shaken,  
Which is the ladder to all high designs,  
Then enterprise is sick! How could communities,  
Degrees in schools and brotherhoods in cities,  
Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,  
The primogenitive and due of birth,  
Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,  
But by degree, stand in authentic place?  
Take but degree away, untune that string,  
And, hark, what discord follows! each thing meets  
In mere oppugnancy: the bounded waters  
Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores  
And make a sop of all this solid globe:  
Strength should be lord of imbecility,  
And the rude son should strike his father dead:  
Force should be right; or rather, right and wrong,  
Between whose endless jar justice resides,  
Should lose their names, and so should justice too.  
Then every thing includes itself in power,  
Power into will, will into appetite;

And appetite, an universal wolf,  
So doubly seconded with will and power,  
Must make perforce an universal prey,  
And last eat up himself. Great Agamemnon,  
This chaos, when degree is suffocate,  
Follows the choking.  
And this neglect of degree it is  
That by a pace goes backward, with a purpose  
It hath to climb. The general's disdain'd  
By him one step below, he by the next,  
That next by him beneath; so every step,  
Exempl'd by the first pace that is sick  
Of his superior, grows to an envious fever  
Of pale and bloodless emulation:  
And 'tis this fever that keeps Troy on foot,  
Not her own sinews. To end a tale of length,  
Troy in our weakness stands, not in her strength.  
(*Troilus and Cressida* Act I, Scene III)

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