

"There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will." These words from Hamlet are echoed, even more pessimistically, in Shakespeare's later play, The Tragedy of King Lear where Gloucester says: "Like flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods, they kill us for their sport". In Lear, the characters are subjected to the various tragedies of life over and over again.

An abundance of cyclic imagery in Lear shows that good people are abused and wronged regardless of their own noble deeds or intentions. Strapped to a wheel of fire, humans suffer and endure, prosper and decline, their very existence imaged as a voyage out and a return. The movement from childhood to age and back again, the many references to fortune whose wheel spins humans downward even as it lifts, the abundance of natural cycles which are seen as controlling experience, even perhaps the movement of play itself from order to chaos to restoration of order to division again.

Throughout the text, the movements of celestial bodies are used to account for human action and misfortune. Just as the stars in their courses are fixed in the skies, so do the characters view their lives as caught in a pattern they have no power to change. Lear sets the play in motion in banishing Cordelia when he swears "by all the operation of the orbs from whom we exist and cease to be" that his decision "shall not be revoked". How like the scene in Julius Caesar wherein Caesar says "For I am constant as the Northern star" Lear vows to be resolute but dies regretting his decision at the hands of his daughters who claim love him "more than word can wield" and are "alone felicitate" in his presence.

That Edmund disbelieves in the influence of the stars adds to the play's recurring theme that part of our fate is our character; that we choose our lot in life by how we choose to act. Similarly, in Lear Gloucester's feelings predict what is to come when he says "These late eclipses of the sun and moon portend no good..." And because of this Gloucester begins to envision a world where "Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide..." While his father misunderstands the importance of the celestial bodies, his bastard son, Edmund denies the importance of the movements of the heavenly bodies. He calls it "an excellent foppery" to "make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon and stars." (Just as in Julius Caesar we learn that "... The fault ... lies not in our stars, but in ourselves"), Edmund in Lear echoes this sentiment when he says "as if we were villains by necessity, fools by compulsion." But what he does not seem to see is that by enacting his plot against his brother Edgar he fulfills Gloucester's prediction and that "Machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders" must be soon to come. And we see in the play that these things do come to pass, not because of the movements of the planets, but because of the flaws in human nature.

The stars are not the only things by which the characters believe their lives to be governed. Characters throughout the play talk of the influence of fortune on their lives. When Cordelia is banished, she has no "fortune", but is accepted by France. Cordelia, with no wealth of her own suddenly in France's eyes she is "Most rich being poor, most choice forsaken, most loved, despised" .

Edmund too, seems to have no fortune of his own. But this he attributes to mere luck, and says that if all goes as he plans "The base shall top the legitimate, I grow, I prosper" . After Gloucester's speech about the eclipses foretelling discord, Edmund twists his father's words against Edgar when the bastard tells his brother "These eclipses portend ... unnaturalness between child and parent, ...divisions in state...banishment of friends ...and I know not what."

The first rise of fortune in the play is when Lear prepares to divide his kingdom among his daughters. He puts them to the test, asking them how much they love him. The first two daughters flatter the old king but Cordelia whose "love is richer than [her] tongue" can only say that she loves her father as much as is her duty, no more nor less. When her portion of the kingdom is divided between her sisters, the two of them plot to get rid of the king, because he is "full of the changes of age...". Goneril suggests they conspire against him ("...let's hit together..."), because she believes their fortunes will be switched if they let him have any authority ("...if our father carry authority with such dispositions as he bears, this last surrender of his will but offend us."). Thus as Cordelia's fortune plummets -- so does Lear's, although he doesn't realise it at first. Indeed, the only one who seems to realize the gravity of Lear's predicament is his fool. The fool mocks Kent's devotion to the king, warning him to "Let go thy hold" because Lear is "a great wheel which rolls down a hill" which will "break thy neck".

Kent's "fortune" rises and falls throughout the play. Before he defends Cordelia to her father, he is an Earl. Then, he is banished and his lands are forfeit. Then, he returns to Lear, incognito and offers his services to the king. Later, as he defends Lear's honor, he is thrown into the stocks by Regan and Cornwall, and he pleads "Fortune ... smile once more and turn thy wheel" While in the stocks, he says good night to "fortune" and hopes for better luck the next day. He is released from the stocks only to be cast out into a terrible tempest. Again fortune is arbitrary only to the point to which

Gloucester's fortunes fall in the play too. He is betrayed by his bastard son Edmund. For his loyalty to the king he is stripped of his title and his lands, his eyes are ripped from their sockets, and he is thrown out "to smell his way to Dover". Ironically, Gloucester, like Lear, is led by one whom he hates yet fails to recognize: his son Edgar. Gloucester at the center of the play learns of Edmund's treachery when his eyes are put out, and the fourth and fifth acts bring with them for him a descent into despair and an achievement of hope and reconciliation. It is mainly in terms of this plot that the time-honoured image of orderly reversal, the slow inexorable turning of the wheel, is used as the dying Edmund says, "The wheel has come full circle". Edgar to whom he speaks has concurrently risen to a share in the government of the island.

The Gloucester family, it seems, thinks in terms of the wheel--the natural course of events, the cycle of nature, the wheel of fortune. Edgar sees not worldly fortune but happiness and misery in the same image: "The lamentable change is from the best. The worst returns to laughter." and again O world! But that thy strange mutations make us hate thee, Life would not yield to age. A moment later, his blinded father appears before him, Edgar exclaims: "The worst is not So long as we can say 'this is the worst'".

The wheel is greater than he had thought and in it's revolution has deeper yet to go. Gloucester himself perhaps thinks of himself as falling from the wheel of fortune is that grotesque act of despair (in the very presence of grace), in which he blesses Edgar as if he were absent, and finds out in the most physical way on Dover cliff that he has nowhere to fall or fall from but his son's care. 'Thy life's a miracle,' Edgar says, on two levels of meaning, and Gloucester resolves: "Henceforth I'll bear Affliction till it do cry out itself 'Enough, enough', and die". From that point affliction ends for him; for him are Edgar's words spoken of a auspicious cycle:

"Men must endure Their going hence even as their coming hither:
Ripeness is all."

In the last scene of the play, however, Lear is reunited with Cordelia. Although the two are about to be taken to prison Lear swears his devotion to Cordelia by another celestial globe. Comforting Cordelia, he says that he and she will watch the changes of the court, see "Who's in, Who's out" but they will outlast the various "... great ones that ebb and flow by the moon". In Lear, the death of hubris that gives rise to the humility of love This is as much a cycle in most of literature, Lear included, as is birth to death. In short death of the old precedes birth of the new. For Lear, it is a death of self-ignorance that gives rise to the birth of self knowledge.

As the play progresses, it becomes more and more clear that all the smaller cycles point towards a big one. This cycle's images are seen again and again throughout the play. The images are those of "nurseries" and old men. Here "fathers are as wards to the sons" and old men "Crawl towards death" like newborn babes. This is the aging cycle. It's cyclic images show us King Lear reduced to the role of child, helpless and dependent on his two wicked daughters.

Then as now, when Lear, the symbol for the oldest generation, gives his power to his daughters (the younger generation) they immediately begin to treat him as if he were the child and they the parents. Within the first month of his decision, Goneril has begun to refer to him as being in his "dotage", that "old fools are babes again" Regan, too after receiving her inheritance says [aside] of her father, "Tis the infirmity of age:"

The relationship between the father and child is perverted in the Gloucester family , as well just as Lear's daughters deceive him with good intentions, so too does Edmund deceive his father. Edmund, stepping into his father's rights and title says 'the younger rises when the old doth fall". Like Lear's daughters, Edmund conspires against his father and his brother to steal his father's land and his brother's inheritance, exclaiming: "let me if not by birth, have lands by wit."

As the play progresses, we see more and more images of Lear as a child rather than an old man. In his daughter Goneril's house Lear's fool tells him he has "Made thy daughters thy mothers" and that now he has only "that [he] was born with". Rather than being obedient, Lear's children use their newly-won powers to make of him "an obedient father". Lear quickly realizes this and his mistake. But having given away his power, Lear is as helpless as a child. Perhaps Regan says it best when she says "O sir, you are old, Nature in you stands on the very verge of his confine." You should be ruled, and led."

Some people choose to live within the cycles in the world, some choose to deny them. Those who choose to live within them are stretched out on the rack of the world. They suffer for no reason and die needlessly. Those who deny them die too. But we see that they have lived without virtue. King Lear begins the play acting more like a child than a man, much less a king. As the play progresses and Lear's suffering increases, we see him reaching out more and more to others. (stick in the virtue spiel) Necessity changes the evil things into good ones, but we are witnessing a heavenlier transformation in Lear's charitable concern for his fellow creature. People rebel against greed. The stars aren't responsible for what happens to us. Luck doesn't cause good or bad things to happen to us but the fault, the tragedy of human existence and even the brief moments of love and beauty that we experience lie not in the stars but in ourselves. Rosalie Colie said it best when she wrote "Lives lived w/out virtue aren't worth living."

