Order/Disorder: Power Politics in *King Lear*

- **Dividing the Kingdom**
  - Why divide the kingdom?
  - Subverting order? Creating rivalries?

- **Loyalty, Alliances, and Rivalries** ("no honor among thieves")
  - "True" loyalty (Cordelia, Kent); "True believers" (Gloucester, esp. in 1.2; 1.2.175)
    - Unfortunately, the true characters are abused and taken advantage of.
  - Fragile alliances of convenience (see 1.1.304)
  - Rivalries among siblings (Goneril/Regan; Edmund toward Edgar)

- **Destroying the Competition** (ambition/pride vs. loyalty/humility)
  - Children > Parents; Edmund > Edgar; Goneril > Regan; G, R, E > France & Cordelia

- **Questions of Succession: What Should the Order Be?**
  - "Natural" order; "The Great Chain of Being"; "Divine Right of Kings"
  - Privileges of custom vs. "plague of custom" (1.2.3)
  - Favoritism/merit
    - Cordelia & Edmund are favored but not first in line
The “Great Chain of Being”

- God
- Angels
- Humans
  - Kings
  - Royalty
  - Dukes, earls, etc.
  - Man over woman
  - First born over second
- Animals
- Plants
- Minerals

Didacus Valades, 1579

Robert Flud, 1617
A Simplified Traditional View:

- **ORDER**
  - Loyalty
  - Humility
  - Submission
  - Following custom
  - Reverence toward authority
  - Centralized authority
  - Security
    - Suggested as “natural”
    - Aligned with images of divinity

- **DISORDER**
  - Disloyalty
  - Pride
  - Ambition
  - Breaking with custom
  - Disrespect toward authority
  - Divided authority
  - Insecurity
    - Suggested as “unnatural”
    - Aligned with images of animals/beasts
Strict Rules of Custom (“Order”) Are Often Terribly Unfair

• Who should rule & why?
• Why should the first born be privileged? Why should men?
• Why should Edmund be considered a “bastard”?
• Why should one submit to the whims of an elder, a male, or a higher rank?
• Cordelia & Kent are loyal and mistreated; they respect authority but do not bow to its whims.

Competition (Instead of Submitting to Custom) Can Sometimes Make Humans Like Beasts (an “unnatural” image in the play)

• Lear feels G & R treat him as if they were animals, and he feels they treat him as if he were an animal.
• Edmund is willing to give up his brother and father to gain power. He’d kill anyone.
• Goneril would kill her own sister to secure her own desires.

• The play calls customs/authority (“order”) into question but also warns us about the disorder/chaos that can ensue when they crumble.
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**Examples in the play of not following custom/authority ("order"):**

- Lear retiring, giving up his throne early.
- Lear dividing the kingdom instead of leaving it all to the next in line.
  - (Perhaps he does this out of favoritism toward Cordelia, last in line)
- Having a child out of wedlock.
- Not honoring thy father; not honoring the king.

**Remember:** examples of dystopia/utopia usually highlight tensions between security and freedom.

**King Lear emphasizes insecurity ensues as authority ("order") crumbles.**
Although the play reveals customs (“order”) can be unfair and authority can be corrupt, it also suggests things can quickly fall apart when custom (“order”) is not followed and authority is weakened.

The play dramatizes the chaos of decentralized authority—weakened power that is no longer regarded with reverence as absolute authority.

Queen Elizabeth I was revered as a god-like queen capable of controlling the weather, but King Lear is reduced to a pathetic old man stuck in a storm.

King James I came to power in 1603 after the death of Elizabeth; *King Lear* was written in 1605. James was not revered like Elizabeth; it’s said he lacked charisma. Perhaps that’s a reason why “The Divine Right of Kings” got new emphasis during his reign. If courtiers wouldn’t treat him like a god, he had to remind them of it.
The Seventeenth Century

- In the next few classes, we’ll be seeing noteworthy changes marked by Jonson, the Cavalier poets, the Revolutionary era, Marvell, & Milton

- Old world views giving way to more modern and scientific ones (p. 1349-1352).

- Ptolemaic universe, 4 elements, bodily humors, “chain of being.”
- Galileo’s sacrilegious support of Copernicus’ heliocentric (sun-centered, not earth-centered) astronomical theory.
- Travel that discovered species difficult to account for under old models.
- William Harvey discovered blood circulates, contrary to old ideas (“humors”)
- Bacon’s contributions to science and its method (separate from theology)
  - “He segregated theology and science as ‘two truths,’ freeing science to go its own way . . .” (1663).
- Examples of disrupted order dramatized in Shakespeare’s King Lear

- And yet, an idealized image of order in Ben Jonson’s “To Penshurst”
The Seventeenth Century

- **Ben Jonson** (p. 1441-1443):
  - Unofficial poet laureate; pension from King James
  - Friends with Shakespeare, Donne, Francis Bacon, the Sidney family, and the “Sons of Ben”—younger poets including Herrick.

- “**To Penshurst**” (p. 1546-1548) from 1616
  - An interesting note: Sir Philip Sidney was born at Penshurst.
  - Also interesting: part of *The Princess Bride* was filmed there.
  - It’s a country-house poem (a genre) that “offers an ideal image of a social order in which a virtuous patriarchal governor offers ready hospitality to guests of all stations, from poets to Kings” (p. 1443).
  - It depicts the “agrarian, feudal order that Jonson may have romanticized but that he suspected was rapidly disappearing” (p. 1355).
  - It suggests everyone’s needs are provided for (in “right” order).