Shakespeare's *King Lear* portrays the enormity of evil on both the microcosmic scale of the family and the macrocosmic scale of society. The injustice Lear suffers from the cruelty of his daughters in the home reverberates throughout the larger society of England and echoes throughout nature and the universe in the violent storm that rages in the heath scene of Act III. Shakespeare demonstrates how the root of this evil originates in the obliteration of logical, natural distinctions that inhere in the structure of reality. For example, Lear confuses his daughters' expression of love for him by his failure to discern the distinction between flattery and praise, between the honor due to a father and the love due to a husband, between respecting a father and worshipping a god. The villainous Edmund in his defense of bastard children argues that no real difference distinguishes legitimate and illegitimate children in their physical endowments and mental powers, mocking the meaning of "legitimate" as an arbitrary, irrational convention and legal technical term. Lear's ungrateful daughters, Goneril and Regan, ignore their father's status as father and king, demoting him to an old man unworthy of the symbols of kingship and the dignity of a revered father. In other words, Shakespeare shows that moral anarchy erupts when the natural hierarchical relationships that inhere in the nature of things—a father's authority over his children, a king's rule over his subjects, reason's sway over the passions—are viewed as unnatural, tyrannical, arbitrary forms of power rather than God-given forms of natural order.

Those who attack the natural order of hierarchy obliterate not only the real distinctions between parent and child, king and subject, and god and man but also change the meanings of words. Quantity and quality, animal and man, lust and love, custom and natural law all become equivalent pairs. Child and father, man and God, and good and evil become interchangeable terms rather than discrete categories. The unnaturalness of the raging tempest in all of its fury reflects the violence of a brutal society that rejects and betrays fathers, and this lawless anarchy in society originates from the attack on fatherhood and the disintegration of the family. The family is a natural hierarchy, and the father possesses rightful authority. The violation of this order in *King Lear* leads to tyranny, cruelty, death, and moral chaos. The modern world commits all the
errors that cause the tragedy in *King Lear* and that lead to universal evil and self-destruction. In short, the disorder in the family that precipitates the anarchy and injustice in *King Lear* reflects the same moral principles and root causes that have created the cultural wasteland of contemporary American society as indicated in William J. Bennett's *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators*.

In Act I Lear divides his vast property and bequeaths his luxurious wealth to his three daughters on the basis of the alleged quantity of their love for their father: "Which of you shall we say doth love us most?" (I.i. 52) After Goneril flatters her father with the pretentious claim that she loves him more dearly than "eyesight, space, and liberty, / Beyond what can be valued, rich, or rare" (I.i. 57-58), Regan strives to outdo her sister's hyperbole, testifying that Goneril's statement does not do full justice to her own profound affection for her beloved father. Exaggerating, Regan vows that her father's love is her greatest source of happiness: "... I am alone felicitate/ In your dear Highness' love." (I.i. 77-78) Refusing to indulge in the cant of her sisters, Cordelia professes her love with simple honesty and natural eloquence: "... I love your Majesty/ According to my bond, nor more nor less." (I. i. 94-95) She thanks her father for the gift of life, for the blessings of an education, and for his lifelong care: "You have begot me, bred me, loved me." (I. i. 98) Loving her father "according to my bond," that is, according to her filial duty and debt of piety, Cordelia offers her father just praise, not fulsome flattery: "... I return those duties back as are right fit, / Obey you, love you, and most honor you." (I.i. 99-101)

Cordelia is disgusted at her sisters' boast that they love their father "all," as if he were some divine being rather than a mortal. She is disturbed at her sisters' pretense that they love their father even more than their husbands: "Why have my sisters' husbands if they say/ They love you all?" (I. i. 101-102) Thus Shakespeare in this opening scene identifies the source of evil and the cause of tragedy as the failure to see natural differences and hierarchical distinctions. Lear is confusing appearance with reality, failing to distinguish between lies and truth, between flattery and praise, between words and deeds. Goneril and Regan are obliterating the difference between the love for a parent and the love for a husband and obscuring the distinction between humoring a crotchety king and honoring an aged father. Using the measure of size and the multiplication of empty words, Lear substitutes quantity for quality as he fails to discern the distinction between the purity of Cordelia's heart and the greed of Goneril's and Regan's ambition. Lear's moral blindness to these logical distinctions and Goneril and Regan's disruption of the natural hierarchy of the family foreshadow the great social upheaval that will erupt later in the flagrant injustices in society and in the devastating cataclysm of the furious storm.

Edmund, the bastard son of Gloucester, argues that the words "legitimate" and "illegitimate" are equivocal terms lacking any distinction or substantive meaning. To him it is purely an accident of fortune--a mere matter of months--

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that he is deprived of his inheritance as the eldest son:

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? (I.ii. 2-6)

Edmund argues that his vigor of mind and body qualify him as the equal of his "legitimate" brother; therefore, the difference between a child born out of wedlock in lust and a child born in wedlock out of love is purely adventitious. Edmund acknowledges no universal moral law, reducing natural law to "the plague of custom," and he equates man's nature with the instinct of animals rather than with right reason: "Thou, Nature art my goddess, to thy law/ My services are bound." (I.ii. 1-1) Like Goneril and Regan, he too manipulates his father and obfuscates the logical meaning of words and the natural differences between man and animal, law and custom, moral and legal, and love and lust.

After Lear divides his estate and resigns his kingship, he soon notices a lack of respect and a loss of honor, an absence of "ceremonious affection" and the presence of "a most faint neglect." Goneril's servant Oswald addresses the former king as "my lady's father," demeaning him to an inferior subject. The court fool ridicules Lear for abdicating his natural authority and subordinating himself to the rule of his daughters, bluntly stating, "... thou madest thy daughters thy mother" and "... thou gavest them the rod and puttest down thine own breeches." (I. iv. 187-190) Goneril and Regan both brusquely refuse their father's request for a retinue of one hundred retainers to accompany him at court, thus stripping him of symbols of honor due to a king and robbing a father of his dignity. When Regan and Goneril spurn Lear's request for the privileges of his former office, denying him the honor of even one retainer, Lear rejects their begrudging offer to receive him alone as a humble subject rather than as a former king with his one hundred attendants:

Oh, reason not the need. Our basest beggars
Are in the poorest things superfluous.
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man's life is cheap as beast's. (II. iv. 267-270)

When Goneril and Regan argue that Lear does not require even one servant and that his symbols of kingship are superfluous, he reminds them that man's dignity and humanity deserve "more than nature needs" to distinguish human beings from animals. Lear reminds his daughters that their many articles of clothing serve aesthetic purposes and go beyond the bare necessity of protection from cold; their apparel establishes the dignity of their person and beautifies their appearance: "Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st,/ Which scarcely keeps thee warm." (II. iv. 272-273) In other words,
without the beautiful clothing, the formal rituals, the symbols of office, and the tokens of respect—those marks that distinguish individuals and acknowledge the natural hierarchical differences among men—man is no different from animals, and his life is as "cheap as beast's." The distinction between man and animals involves such "superfluous" amenities and beautiful adornments as the civilizing customs that Lear refers to as "The offices of nature, bond of childhood./ Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude." (II. iv. 182-183) Once the natural order of the family ("the offices of nature") is violated and Lear is treated as a child rather than as a father; once the bond of childhood is ignored and Lear's daughters treat their father with ingratitude, "the marble-hearted fiend"; and once the honor and respect due to a king and father are abolished and Lear is reduced to a beggar and outcast, then civilization degenerates to barbarism, and human society is transformed into an animal kingdom. In Lear's words, "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is/ To have a thankless child." (I. iv. 310-311)

Shakespeare depicts this universal injustice and rampant moral anarchy in Act III in the raging of the storm. The unleashing of all the violent, destructive forces of the tempest resembles the lawless powers and animal passions that erupt when hierarchy is violated and fatherhood is desecrated. As a universal symbol of life's injustice the rage of the storm spares no one:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!

(The. ii. 1-3)

The victims of the storm represent all the ranks and ages of men from the highest to the lowest (the king and the fool) to rulers and subjects (Lear and Kent) to fathers and sons (Lear and Edgar)—a cross-section of society and humanity. All these characters who endure the fury of the storm have suffered the cruel injustice of life. Lear remarks to Goneril and Regan, "I gave you all" (II. iv. 252), yet he receives nothing from his ungrateful daughters. Kent serves his king out of loyalty and love, yet he is banished from the kingdom by Lear for defending Cordelia's truthfulness and innocence. Edgar, the loyal, innocent son of Gloucester, is accused of treachery while the villainous son Edmund is cherished for his fidelity. This great injustice of life appears so overwhelming to Lear that he invokes the forces of nature to "Strike flat the thick rotundity o' the world!/ Crack nature's molds, all germens spill at once/ That make ingrateful man." (III. ii. 7-9) In the agony of feeling betrayed by the daughters to whom he gave "all," Lear implores nature to plague them with the evil of barrenness and to punish the world with the curse of sterility:

Hear, Nature, hear, dear goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful.
Into her womb convey sterility.
Dry up in her the organs of increase,
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honor her! (I. iv. 297-303)

Because of the ingratitude of Goneril and Regan that breaks his heart, Lear sees no purpose in fatherhood or in begetting children in wedlock in the culture of a family. There appears to be, as Edmund proclaimed, no difference between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" children, for, as Lear observes, "Gloucester's bastard son/ Was kinder to his father than my daughters/ Got 'tween the lawful sheets." (IV. vi. 116-118) There appears to be no essential difference between animal reproduction and human procreation if no bond of love unites a father with his children. Because Lear gave to his children life and they in turn seek his death, he calls Goneril and Regan not his daughters but "tigers," "pelicans," and "Centaurs." Thus Lear ponders the meaning of sterility and copulation during the anguish of his suffering in the storm. Man should be barren and not procreate because the fruits of love are ingratitude, or man should breed promiscuously in the heat of lust like animals: "Let copulation thrive," Lear cries out, adding "To't, luxury, pell-mell!!" (IV. vi. 116; 119) The cosmic injustice that Lear witnesses in the storm impels him to question the purpose of marriage and procreation and to ponder the nature of man.

During the raging storm the victims are reduced to the level of animals struggling for survival. Kent leads Lear to a hovel, the helpless king seeking shelter like a creature searching for its cave. Lear invites the poor fool to go into the hovel before him because of the cold: "In, boy, go first." (III. iv. 26) When Lear beholds Gloucester's loyal son Edgar disguised as poor Tom of Bedlam, the victim of his brother Edmund's slanders, the king is shocked at the raggedness of poor Tom's clothing and at the abject wretchedness of his misery: "Is man no more than this? . . . Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art." (III. iv. 106; 110-112) Again Lear ponders the nature of man: Is he essentially an animal whose life is "cheap as beast's," a thin, bare forked animal merely superficially covered by articles of clothing that disguise his true identity as one of little worth? Do clothes enhance the inherent nobility of man, or do they merely conceal his insignificant value and hide his brutish, rapacious nature? When coverings and clothing are stripped away and expose man's poverty and weakness, is he lowered to an animal motivated by selfishness, or does he rise to heights of heroism that demand courage and sacrifice?

Lear discovers the answer to his question during his struggle for survival on the heath. He not only witnesses the reduction of man to a state of destitution and degradation but also beholds the heroism, sacrifices, and service of fellow humans that reveal the depths of love and a passion for justice. The heath scene proves that man is not a selfish animal ruled by
uncontrollable appetites but a moral being governed by the natural law. Kent returns good for evil, continuing to serve his king despite Lear's peremptory dismissal of his servant for defending Cordelia's honesty. Serving his king in disguise, Kent does good by stealth and acts from the most disinterested motives. When Cordelia acknowledges her immense debt to Kent and expresses a wish to reward his goodness, Kent responds, "To be acknowledged, madam, is o'erpaid." (IV. vii. 4) The prideful Lear who demanded the gratification of his whims and insisted on the adulation of his daughters humbles himself during the storm to wait upon the fool, putting the comfort of the fool ahead of the safety of the king: "Come on, my boy. How dost, my boy? Art cold?" (III. ii. 68) Beholding the pathetic condition of Edgar in his disguise as poor Tom, Lear commiserates the beggar's abject condition more than he pities his own suffering from his daughters' cruelty. Gloucester risks his life and ventures into the storm to succor his king, ignoring the threats of Cornwall and Regan and suffering the consequences of blindness for defying their orders. Gloucester vows, "Though I die for it, as is no less threatened me, the king my old master must be relieved." (III. iii. 17-20) All of these acts of service, kindness, compassion, sacrifice, heroism, and justice prove that man's life is not "cheap as beast's" and that man is more than "a poor, bare, forked animal."

Dispossessed of his wealth, title, and authority, Lear is not deprived of his humanity, dignity, or nobility as he endures the storm heroically and shows pity for the misery of others. Robbed of the pomp and circumstance of kingship and haunted by the hardheartedness of Goneril and Regan, Lear discovers the meaning between sentimentality and love, between insincere words and just deeds, between selfishness and selflessness. In his comment, "Take physic, pomp" (III. iv. 33), Lear realizes that the true measure of love and justice was Cordelia's statement of truth, not the bombast of Regan and Goneril:

You have begot me, bred me, loved me. I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honor you. (I. i. 98-100)

In presuming to be adored like a god instead of honored like a father, Lear precipitated the tragedy that afflicted him during the storm. In violating their duty to their father and failing to bestow upon him the respect due a parent for begetting them, educating them, loving them, and giving them "all," Goneril and Regan attack fatherhood and destroy the bond of parent and child --the source of civilization and the foundation of justice.

This injustice on the microcosmic scale of the family leads to tyranny and lawlessness on the macrocosmic scale of society. Gloucester observes, "In cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father." (I. iii. 116-118) Regan not only disowns her father and

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abandons him to the fierce tempest but also consents to her husband's sadistic blinding of Gloucester as punishment for his kindness to Lear in the storm. Edmund's revenge against Gloucester for fathering him as an illegitimate son leads to his abuse of Edgar and to his command for Cordelia's death sentence. Might becomes right as Goneril, Regan, Cornwall, and Edmund arbitrarily wield power as they inflict the violent injustices that cause Lear's madness, Gloucester's blindness, Edgar's abandonment, and Cordelia's death. When the jealousy of Goneril and Regan competes for the love of Edmund in a frenzy of lust and wrath, then uncontrollable animal passions imitate the wild, destructive elements raging in the tempest with its "sulphurous and thought-executing fires" and "oak-cleaving thunderbolts." The universal moral chaos epitomized by the storm originates in the violation of the hierarchy of the family. The lawlessness in society stems from the attack on the natural authority of fatherhood. The state of a society is a reflection of the condition of the family.

Edgar and Cordelia, however, honor the bond between father and child and continue to perform their filial duties, even though both have suffered injustice from the blindness of their fathers' rash judgments. Naively believing Edmund's lies about Edgar's treachery, Gloucester accepts the slanders accusing Edgar of plotting his death. Despite being falsely accused and rejected by his father, Edgar continues to serve Gloucester and perform his filial obligations of piety to his parent. Returning good for evil, Edgar in disguise accompanies his blind father to the cliffs of Dover and consoles him in the darkest hours of despair. Like Kent in disguise serving Lear, Edgar as poor Tom also does good by stealth, acting anonymously for reasons of justice and love. Cordelia too continues to honor and serve Lear despite his willful, peremptory rejection of her authentic expression of pure love: "I love your Majesty/ According to my bond, nor more nor less." (I. i. 94-95) Although Lear deprives Cordelia of her rightful dowry, banishes her from his sight, and vents his unprovoked wrath upon her--all because Cordelia refuses to humor his egotistic pride and "Heave/ My heart into my mouth"--Cordelia instantly returns from France upon hearing of the abuse and affliction visited upon her father by her sisters. Cordelia's love for Lear is not based on the property or wealth he will bestow upon her but upon her "bond," the natural gratitude of a child to a parent for the unrepayable debts that the gift of life incurs. Returning to England during the strife of a civil war, Cordelia risks her life for her father and ultimately makes the supreme sacrifice of dying in his cause.

No blown ambition doth our arms incite,
But love, dear love, and our aged father's right. (IV. iv. 26-27)

Remaining always loyal to their fathers, Edgar and Cordelia reveal the depth of their love. They forgive the follies of their parents, they return good for evil, they love justice for its own sake, they serve in the sense of giving without
expecting to receive, they never forget their debt of gratitude, and, in Mother Teresa's phrase, they love "until it hurts." Their examples prove that copulation should not thrive and that man should not imitate the wren, the fly, or the horse that "goes t’it" with "riotous appetite" but procreate in marriage out of love. They prove that the fruits of love are not the ingratitude of children but the honoring of one's father and mother.

The attack upon fatherhood, then, violates not only the natural bond between parent and child but also destroys love and justice—the necessary ideals for civilization that lift human society above the animal kingdom. The attack upon fatherhood also undermines other essential moral virtues that ennable the dignity of persons and that form a civil, lawful society. Loyalty, gratitude, piety, reverence, patience, forgiveness, and sacrifice represent the qualities that filial children like Edgar and Cordelia embody as they honor their parents according to their bond. The attack upon fatherhood also corrupts the meaning of authority, hierarchy, and natural law—other important aspects of a just society. Lear's children are his daughters, not his mother. A legitimate and an illegitimate child are not morally the same. The natural law and the universal moral order are not what Edmund calls "the plague of custom" but reflections of eternal law and divine justice. Edgar and Cordelia refute the curse of sterility that Lear placed upon Goneril ("Dry up in her the organs of increase"), proving that the fruits of love are piety and reverence toward one's parents. As the Gentleman says of Cordelia, "Thou hast one daughter/ Who redeems nature from the general curse." (IV. vi. 209-210) Cordelia and Edgar redeem the meaning of fatherhood, procreation, natural law, justice, and love from the "general curse," from the various attacks of Goneril, Reagan, and Edmund upon the sanctity of the family.

The modern world commits all the same errors that precipitate the social upheaval in King Lear, and the modern world witnesses the same universal moral anarchy depicted by fury of the storm in the play. First, just as Goneril and Regan failed to honor their father and disparaged his authority, so too the state disregards the natural authority of parents as the primary educators of their children by compulsory public school education that opposes parental choice and tuition vouchers for private schools. The state superimposes a social agenda that promotes sex education in public schools that defies traditional moral teachings like chastity and purity that parents honor and transmit to their children. The modern world dishonors the natural authority of parents by allowing teen-age abortion decisions that do not involve parental notification and by permitting women to abort their children without the consent of fathers. The homosexual agenda that seeks to indoctrinate children into an acceptance of same-sex marriages through books like Heather Has Two Mommies and Daddy's Roommate in the public schools also violates the rights and authority of parents in the education of their offspring.

Second, just as Goneril and Regan attempted to be Lear's mother rather than his daughters, the modern world rejects the hierarchical structure of the
family, confusing justice with sameness and equating equality with quotas. Radical feminists equate patriarchy with tyranny and oppression and reject St. Paul's teaching that husbands are to love their wives and wives to obey their husbands. They fail to acknowledge the natural, complementarity of male and female that confers upon the man the headship of the family and honors woman as the heart of the home. Feminist ideology fails to grasp the paradox that governs the relationship of husband and wife: man represents authority and woman power. As G. K. Chesterton explains this distinction:

If I look round any ordinary room at all the objects--at their color, choice, and place--I feel as if I were a lonely and stranded male in a world made wholly by woman. . . . If a burglar wanders about the house, it is I who ought to parlay with him. Because I am the head.1

Feminist rhetoric associates justice and equality with sameness, disregarding the natural, inherent differences between men and women that endow them with special gifts and unique talents. The notion of women in combat, women astronauts, and women priests denies the hierarchical structure of reality.

Third, the modern world blurs the essential distinctions that determine the nature of reality. Fatherhood and motherhood lose their inherent, universal meanings in the reproductive technologies of in-vitro fertilization that permit sperm donors and surrogate mothers as replacements for biological parents. The prevalence of day-care institutions assumes that no qualitative difference distinguishes a mother's care of her own children and that of an employed babysitter. The distinction between God and man also wanes as man presumes to be the arbiter of life and death in the decisions of abortion and euthanasia. The meaning of sacred and profane withers in the practice of fetal experimentation that promotes the use of human tissue in the curing of disease and in the production of commercial products; the distinction between a human body and animal flesh is eradicated. The modern world renounces the normative definition of natural and unnatural as heterosexual and homosexual are judged as "alternative" or morally equivalent. The word "tolerance" comes to mean acceptance and endorsement of sin and immorality, thus distorting the meaning of good and evil. The word "family" comes to be defined, as it was at the United Nations Cairo Conference, as a multitude of living arrangements rather than as the natural order of marriage between man and woman for the procreation of children. In other words, ideology in all its contemporary forms proclaims with Shakespeare's Edmund that "legitimate" and "illegitimate" mean nothing but unfounded biases that deserve extinction.

Thus the moral decline in contemporary American society stems from the crisis in the family precipitated by the attacks on fatherhood and motherhood. The multitude of social problems identified in William J. Bennett's The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators reflects the same tumultuous upheaval that Shakespeare presents in the storm that rages in King Lear. Describing the
moral collapse of American culture during the past thirty years, Bennett writes,

... there has been a 560 percent increase in violent crime; more than a 400 percent increase in illegitimate births; a quadrupling in divorce rates; a tripling of the percentage of children living in single-parent homes; more than a 200 percent increase in the teenage suicide rate; and a drop of almost 80 points in the S.A.T. scores.

William D. Gairdner's recent *The War Against the Family* echoes the same theme and reaches many of the same conclusions. Noting the increase in non-marital births from less than 5 percent of total live births in 1921 to 23 percent of total live births in 1988, Gairdner's analysis demonstrates the correlation between illegitimate births and fatherless homes. Fatherless homes, in turn, lead to single-parenthood—a condition that leads to a social underclass that requires a welfare state and breeds crime and violence. Citing the study of Charles Murray in *The Emerging British Underclass* (London, 1990), Gairdner explains the far-reaching consequences of illegitimacy:

Murray argues that the welfare state has removed the social stigma of illegitimacy, and the rewards of virtue and marriage, and has even created economic incentives for single-parenthood. In effect, single mothers are now marrying the state. It's the new paternalism.²

This substitution of governmental paternalism for authentic fatherhood leads to the phenomenal increase in crime and other social pathologies. Because of this permissive attitude toward illegitimacy, Gairdner (quoting Murray) explains,

Communities break down ... when large numbers of unmarried women have babies .... Men who do not support families find other ways to prove that they are men, which tend to take destructive forms ....³

Thus Shakespeare's truth in *King Lear* is timeless: illegitimacy is not the "plague of custom" but a curse upon society. Legitimacy is not a legal term but the moral foundation of a civilized society. If copulation thrives, society is destroyed. If fatherhood is honored, love governs the world. If hierarchy is preserved, justice reigns.

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**Notes**


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