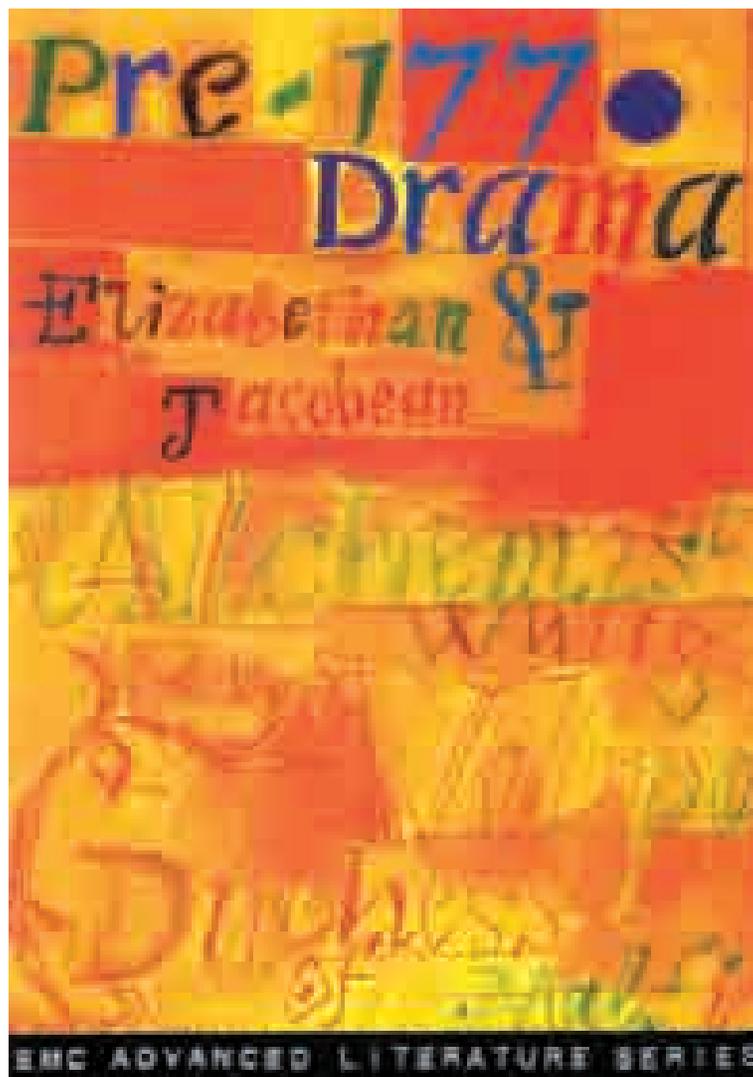


# Order & Disorder from Pre-1770 Drama



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## Order and disorder

In this unit you will:

- gain insight into the way Elizabethans thought about their world (sometimes known as the 'Elizabethan World Picture')
- use these insights to help you understand the significance of key ideas and images in the play that you are studying
- consider the ways in which this world picture is questioned or challenged by the plays.

### Introduction to order and degree

#### God, Man and Nature

In the Elizabethan World Picture, everything in the Universe fitted into three overall classes of existence:

- heavenly
- human
- natural.

#### The Great Chain of Being

Below is a list of some of the different categories that many Elizabethans and Jacobean saw as making up their world. These categories were ranked in order of status and importance.

- Look through the list of categories and attempt to organise them into the order you think they would have occupied in the Elizabethan and Jacobean hierarchy.
  - Angels
  - Liquids and metals
  - Insects
  - Animals
  - Man
  - Birds
  - God
  - Shellfish and parasites
  - Plants

Each category was believed to have a particular role in the hierarchy or 'Great Chain of Being'.

- Talk about what this might be.
  - Why should each be ranked higher or lower than other categories?
  - What merits does each category have and how might they benefit each other?

Each category was then further sub-divided, as is shown here, so that everything in the universe had a specific place in the 'Great Chain of Being'.

- Within each category, decide on the order you think each one might have occupied within the 'Great Chain of Being' and analyse the thinking behind your decisions.

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- The rose, the lily, the poppy
- The queen apple, the turnip, the cabbage
- Ruby, topaz, diamonds
- Silver, brass, gold
- Earth, water, pebbles
- The lion, the dog, the mouse
- The eagle, the sparrow, the lark
- The oak, herbs, the birch
- The flea, the ant, the oyster
- The spider, the beetle, the fly

- Compare your ideas with the pair next to you and explain the reasons for your decisions. Talk about the patterns you notice.

## Social hierarchy

The category of man was also further subdivided into the categories listed here.

- The monarch
- The royal family
- Nobles
- The courtiers
- The citizens
- Yeomen
- Artisans and labourers
- Rogues and the unemployed

## A hierarchy of human qualities?

- Read through the following list of abstract nouns and try to rank them in order of superiority, as you think the Elizabethans would have perceived them. Do you think that our society would rank them differently?

- Reason
- Passion
- Lust
- Greed
- Ambition
- Jealousy
- Anger
- Spirituality
- Honour
- Honesty

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## Microcosm and macrocosm

The Medieval and Renaissance view of the 'Great Chain of Being' included the belief that the kingdom, each household and each individual was a microcosm, or miniature, of the universe.

- To help you consolidate your understanding of the 'Elizabethan World Picture', read the explanation below.
- As a class, talk about the insights this information gives you into the likely relationships between individuals within households and the wider community.

Medieval thinking had been dominated by the idea that God had organised the world into a series of linked hierarchies, so that human beings were ranked as (just) inferior to the angels but superior to animals, which in turn were superior to plants, and so on. Within these hierarchies, or 'domains', lay further hierarchies: a king was at the top of the human pyramid, a lion above all beasts and an eagle above all birds. While ideas were changing in Shakespeare's time, this type of thinking was still influential, and this means that we, from our modern perspectives, might find some of his analogies or comparisons surprising. For example, in medieval thought an eagle had far more in common with a king or a lion – as the chief creatures in their own domains – than it did with other birds. Such correspondences were simply the way God had organised the world. The extensive use of comparison and analogy in the plays of the time reveals the way in which people might seek to acknowledge the links in what was known as the 'Great Chain of Being' and to exploit these for effect ...

The Great Chain of Being organised the world into a fixed order, with God at the top, descending successively through angels, men, women (!), animals, birds, fishes, insects, trees and plants to stones. There were seven orders of angels, with archangels at the top. Men were organised in a fixed order from king down to serf.

Such domains within the greater hierarchy meant that the structure of each class reflected the structure of creation as a whole. Even parts of the human body corresponded to other elements in society ...

*Sean McEvoy, Shakespeare: the basics, 2000*

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## Contemporary accounts of the 'Elizabethan World Picture'

The following accounts of the 'Elizabethan World Picture' are by sixteenth century writers.

- Read the accounts and talk about the way in which the hierarchical structure of the universe is presented.
  - Who do you think is the audience for each piece?
  - What do you think is the purpose of each piece?
  - What do they suggest about Elizabethan attitudes towards order and disorder compared with our own?

Every kind of trees herbs birds beasts and fishes have a peculiar disposition appropereed unto them by God their creator; so that in everything is order, and without order may be nothing stable or permanent. And it may not be called order except it do contain in it degrees, high and base, according to the merit or estimation of the thing that is ordered.

*Thomas Elyot, (1490-1546), The Boke Named The Governour*

Almighty God hath created and appointed all things, in heaven, earth, and waters, in a most excellent and perfect order. In heaven he hath appointed distinct or (several) orders and states of archangels and angels. In earth he hath assigned and appointed kings, princes, with other governors under them, all in good and necessary order. The water above is kept, and raineth down in due time and season. The sun, moon, stars, rainbow, thunder, lightning, clouds, and all the birds of the air do keep their order. All the parts of the whole year, as winter, summer, months, nights, and days continue in their order. All kinds of fishes in the sea, rivers and waters, with all fountains, springs, yea, the seas themselves, keep their comely course and order. And man himself also hath all his parts both within and without, as soul, heart, mind, memory, understanding, reason, speech, with all and singular corporal members of his body, in a profitable, necessary, and pleasant order. Every degree of people in their vocation, calling, and office, hath appointed to them their duty and order. Some are in high degree, some in low; some kings and princes, some inferiors and subjects; priests and laymen, masters and servants, fathers and children, husbands and wives, rich and poor; and every one have need of other. So that in all things is to be lauded and praised the goodly order of God: without the which no house, no city, no commonwealth can continue and endure (or last); for, where there is no right order, there reigneth all abuse, carnal liberty, enormity, sin and Babylonical confusion. Take away kings, princes, rulers, magistrates, judges, and such estates of God's order, no man shall ride or go by the highway unrobbed; no man shall sleep in his own house or bed unkilld; no man shall keep his wife, children, and possessions in quietness; all things shall be common; and there must needs follow all mischief and utter destruction of both souls, bodies, goods and commonwealths.

*'An Exhortation Concerning Good Order and Obedience to Rulers and Magistrates' in Certain Sermons or Homilies, 1547*

Now, if nature should intermit her course, and leave altogether though it were but for a while the observation of her own laws; ... if the frame of that heavenly arch erected over our heads should loosen and dissolve itself; ... if the moon should wander from

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her beaten way, the times and seasons of the year blend themselves by disordered and confused mixture, the winds breathe out their last gasp, the clouds yield no rain, the earth be defeated of heavenly influence, the fruits of the earth pine away as children at the withered breasts of their mother no longer able to yield them relief: what would become of man himself, whom these things now do all serve? See we not plainly that obedience of creatures unto the law of nature is the stay of the whole world?

*Richard Hooker, Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, 1593-7*

## Drawing the hierarchy

You are now in a position to piece together your understanding of the 'Elizabethan World Picture'.

- Either in your groups or as a class, draw a diagram on sugar paper to show the divisions or subdivisions in the 'Elizabethan World Picture'. You might, for example, start with God at the top, followed by the angels, followed by man with a line from man to show the subdivisions of this category and so on.

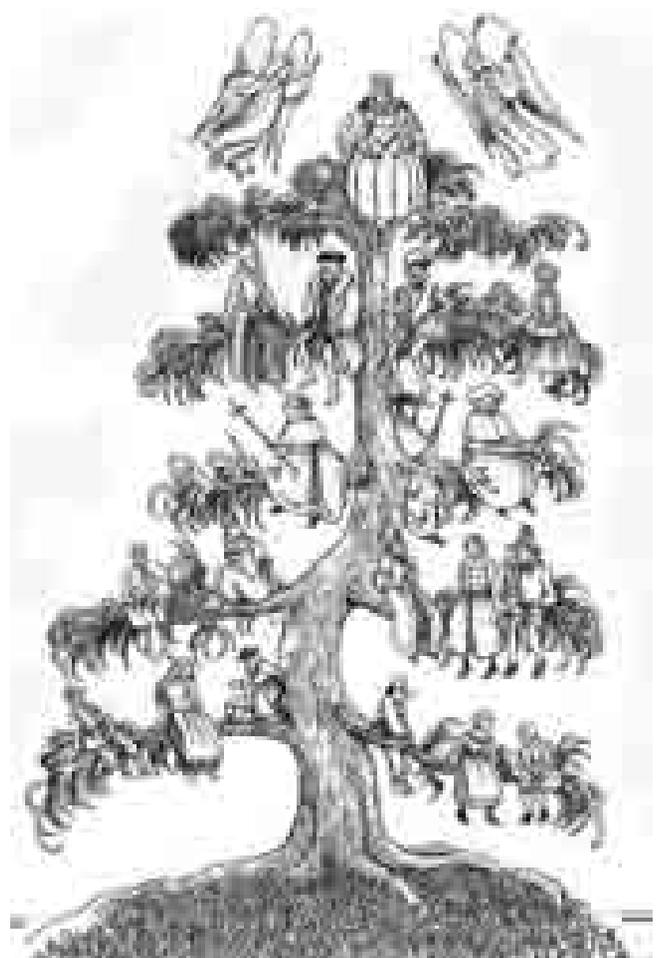
## Applying what you have learned to the play you are studying

- In what ways might this knowledge about the 'Elizabethan World Picture' contribute to your understanding of the images and ideas in the play that you are studying? For instance, how might it influence your interpretation of images of nature, the garden, the body or the household?
- Choose a key scene or speech from the play you are studying and try interpreting it in the light of what you now understand about the 'Elizabethan World Picture'.

## The 'Elizabethan World Picture' as metaphor

It is common to find elements of the 'Elizabethan World Picture' and the 'Great Chain of Being' reflected in metaphors in Renaissance drama, particularly the body and the garden.

- Either using the metaphor of a garden, or of a body, find a parallel for the different subdivisions of man.
  - In the garden metaphor, for example, you will need to consider who is the most important figure in the garden, and who might be represented by the flowers, the trees, the weeds, the paths or the walls.
  - In the body metaphor you might think about who might be represented by the head, the heart, the stomach, the legs of the body and so on.



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## Case study 1 – Richard II

- Study the extract from *Richard II* on page 9 and highlight all the adjectives.
- See how many opposites you can find and place them in two columns, headed 'Positive' and 'Negative'. (You might, for example, think that 'noisome' and 'wholesome' oppose each other.)

### The garden as metaphor

The extract is a conversation between a gardener and two servants. The gardener is instructing the servants on how to keep the garden in order.

- Talk about the questions suggested here.
  - At what point in the speech does the gardener make explicit the fact that this is a metaphor for something else?
  - How effective is the metaphor as a commentary on the state of the king and his kingdom?
  - What do you learn about the king and through which images?
  - What do you learn about the courtiers and through which images?
  - How does this link back to the work that you have done on order and degree in the Renaissance?

## Case study 2 – Coriolanus

Elizabethans often described the state or kingdom in terms of a human body. The common use of this metaphor led to the state becoming known as 'the body politic'. Different components of the state were referred to as different parts of the body.

- With this in mind, draw up a table with two columns. In the left-hand column, put the following body parts into a hierarchy, with the superior at the top: tongue, leg, arm, head, belly, great toe, heart.
- Try matching the parts of the body to the following members of society: soldier, counsellor, senators, citizens, trumpeter, king, steed (horse).
- Read the extract from *Coriolanus* on pages 10-11 and discuss what you think is happening and what it is about.
- Check the parallels which the text draws between the body and the members of society against your own and talk about any differences.

(You may want to look particularly closely at the belly and the head, collecting together the words used by the characters to describe these parts of the body.)

- Talk about anything that you find interesting or surprising.
- Now discuss the fact that the head or 'soveran reason' was often considered by the Elizabethans and Jacobean to be the most respected and powerful part of the body, comparable to the King. What does this reveal about this extract from *Coriolanus*? What, if anything, does it illustrate about:
  - the characters
  - the situation
  - both?

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## Applying what you have learnt to another play

### Disorder in other plays

- Look at the short extracts on pages 13 to 16, which are taken from other plays of the period. Talk about the ways in which ideas about order and disorder are presented and look for points of similarity and difference. Compare the ideas in these extracts with those in the speech by Ulysses.

### Henry V

- If you are studying *Henry V*, read the Archbishop of Canterbury's speech in Act 1, Scene 2, lines 183-220 and consider parallels between the beehive and the members of society. You could compare the version of order and degree in *Coriolanus* or *Richard II* with this extract and consider the extent to which they confirm or challenge the 'Elizabethan World Picture'.

### The Tempest

If you are studying *The Tempest*, follow the suggestion below.

- Bearing in mind that many of the characters in *The Tempest* have been seen to represent the categories in the chain of being, use your diagram of the 'Elizabethan World Picture' (see page 5) to place characters such as Ariel, Prospero, Trinculo and Stephano, and Caliban in the appropriate positions. Give justifications for your decisions.

### The play you are studying

- Consider images of order and disorder, and metaphors for the state or kingdom, in the play you are studying.

### A mini-debate – radical or reactionary?

Critics continue to disagree about whether Shakespeare was a radical who challenged the accepted ideas of his time or a conservative whose plays confirm the status quo.

- In pairs, use what you have learned in this section to debate the following statement:

In plays such as *The Tempest*, *Richard II*, *The Tempest* and *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare questions sixteenth and seventeenth century ideas about the 'Elizabethan World Picture', for example the 'Great Chain of Being' and the 'body politic'.