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THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING
as the
INFORMING PRINCIPLE OF KING LEAR

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There are many themes and motifs in King Lear, among them filial ingratitude and parental blindness, civil and cosmic disorder, disease and decay, madness, despair, and love. Whether or not each viewer knows every theme, the play will continue to be viewed as a great tragedy, and, in reading King Lear, familiarity breeds greater esteem and appreciation.

The philosophy of the Great Chain of Being, popular in Plato's time, in Shakespeare's time, and until the late eighteenth century, informs many aspects of King Lear. The premise of the philosophy of the Great Chain is that there exists a divine order which is right and essentially unalterable. The absence of such a belief in the twentieth century probably causes many readers today to overlook the unifying force that the Great Chain provides to focus the moral vision present in King Lear.

The Great Chain of Being serves as a structural blueprint for King Lear. It provides motivation for the actions of the main characters and significance for the existence of the lesser characters. Cordelia's response to Lear's demand for a declaration of love and Kent's willingness to serve Lear are examples of action in accordance with the Great Chain. Edmund, Goneril and Regan's evil actions would, if successful, break the Chain. The killing of Cornwall by a servant both confirms and denies the Great Chain. Oswald's subversion serves to heighten Goneril's

disregard of her bonds. The contrast between Kent and Oswald, Cordelia and her sisters, Edgar and Edmund, Albany and Cornwall, seems in each case to be a contrast between good and evil, or a contrast between those who accept the order imposed by the Great Chain and those who reject it.

In King Lear, a break in one link of the Great Chain causes other links to break until the entire Chain is in fragments, and the social and moral order fall apart. Disorder increases in a geometric progression.

First, Lear decides to divide his kingdom among his three daughters so that he may "unburdened crawl toward death." This appears to be a natural desire for a man more than eighty years old, but the human weakness of Lear weakens the universal Great Chain of Being. Chaos follows: the bonds are broken that hold together parents, children, husbands, wives, masters, servants, and rulers; war breaks out between Lear's former kingdom and France; death comes for Lear, Cordelia, Goneril, Regan, Cornwall, Gloucester, Edmund, Oswald, Kent, servants and soldiers. Disorder is nearly complete.

Shakespeare uses other themes in the play, but none of these themes is enough to explain all that happens in King Lear. For example, blindness would explain Lear's and Gloucester's failure to understand the goodness of Cordelia and Edgar, but it would not explain the destruction of society. It would not explain Kent's desire to serve Lear, or Cordelia's efforts to restore the crown to her

father. Blindness is almost irrelevant to the final scene, and certainly does not cause so many characters to die. Only the concept of the Great Chain of Being is large enough to provide the moral framework for the play and the philosophical interpretation necessary for the action and the imagery.