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“If thou’rt noble, I do forgive thee”:

A Social Marxist Judgment for Edmund’s Ascent and Debasing of Primogeniture

The reader is the ultimate judge of integrity when he/she chooses a piece of literature and jettisons into a new world filled with an array of characters. Each role possesses a unique quality that results in the creation of a good story, but sometimes readers neglect the fact that these characters do not live in vacuums. They possess the same mental processes and issues that people harbor in everyday life. William Shakespeare stands as one of the most influential individuals in English literature due, in part, to his ability to create unforgettable characters and roles that speak personally to the audience.

Shakespeare strays from the dramatic conventions to produce wonderful plays, and by doing so, he subtly spreads his view of the world. Marxist literary critics, like Alvin W. Gouldner, analyze Shakespeare’s literature to uncover the hidden goals for debasing old establishments and influencing audiences to consider an equalized social order. In his article, “Marxism and Social Theory,” Gouldner examines the ideology and the goals that ground Marxism as a theory. He uses different terminology to explain the aims of Marxist theory, which he describes as the “‘consciousness’ of the working class” or the proletariat (28):

It is a radicalization from above, born not of the intellectual’s own experience but of his identification with the lowly and suffering; born not of his own economic deprivation so much as from the violation of his own Jacobin spirit, the violation of the intellectual’s sense of his own dignity and self-worth, the violation of his

cultural hopes and values and, especially, of his emphatic belief in equality [...]

Through this, the intelligentsia are freed of an uncritical acceptance of the language and ideology of the status quo; freed of respect for its symbols of authority; of any assumptions about its “naturalness” or invulnerability to change.

(28)

Gouldner claims by this interpretation that the actions of an individual primarily come from these social ails or pressures. Such qualms would be the loss of physical and economic security, or facing a state of loss at the hands of other more powerful and prestigious individuals given their rank and stature in society. These powerful individuals symbolize the establishment and power that corrupts from within, oppressing others, and further widening the gap between themselves and lesser individuals. When the proletariat loses integrity in the struggle for equality, he/she crosses the threshold of restraint and applies human instinct to justify their actions and ensure their goals.

Lack of accountability and responsibility in authority is a reoccurring theme in Shakespeare’s plays. In particular, *The Tragedy of King Lear* appears to fit the situation that Gouldner addresses in his argument supporting the ideology and context of the social theory of Marxism. Edmund the Bastard, the son of the Earl of Gloucester, becomes the character that sits with the dilemma. He presents himself as submissive and weak, but as his true goals unfurl, Edmund narrowly exacts his revenge on all the characters. In the process, he almost destroys the establishment, placing himself in a position of central authority. The very hierarchy which he despises thwarts his plans, but his decisions and actions, according to critics, label him as a villain and ultimately evil. That interpretation poses some problems: Understandably, Edmund’s actions are unconscionable; however, given the lack of respect, honor, and freedom of class-

driven society, his situation leaves him no choice but to lash out. As a human being, he only takes a stand for himself, giving himself the justification to separate from his own moral, social, and culturally accepted roles in order to make right what he views as diametrically wrong in his world.

Edmund is one of the most complex characters in *King Lear*. He surfaces from the beginning as one of the most docile and calm characters, but personally holds a number of vengeful attitudes for being a bastard and also because of the system of primogeniture. Since he is the son of an earl, he is able to stay at the home with other members of the household. When readers and audiences first see him, he lacks assertiveness and confidence. While staying at Gloucester's residence, Edmund does come in constant contact with the establishment and the system of hierarchy even though he does not necessarily belong. Gloucester introduces his bastard son at the beginning of the play like a poster-child for illegitimacy to which Edmund responds submissively, as if on display, "My services to your lordship" (I.i.28). Given his father's statements, Edmund can clearly see how his father views him: "I have so often blushed to acknowledge him that now I am brazed to't" (I.i.9-10). He does not seem too particularly accepting of Gloucester's criticism, which is harsh at best, but Edmund lacks the freedom to defend his dignity.

In order to grasp fully the complexities of Edmund's motivations, one must first understand the role that primogeniture plays in *King Lear*. Unlike his legitimate brother Edgar, the hierarchy ostracizes Edmund because he is that illegitimate child, and because Gloucester makes it painfully clear how much he loathes his bastard son, the respect Edmund receives is less than admirable. As a member of the household, however, he still encounters frustration because he does not have that admiration and respect that his brother receives. Edgar appears with more

prestige and resilience because he is the rightful heir to the throne. Edmund does not have the same forms of securities in his life. The Middle Ages were a harsh time where family dynamics were determined by the primogeniture system. In his essay, “The Problem of Survival for the Angevin ‘Empire’: Henry II’s and His Sons’ Vision versus Late Twelfth-Century Realities,” Ralph V. Turner examines the social and political constraints of Henry II’s rule and the complications of inheritance and primogeniture during the Middle Ages. While *King Lear* takes place around the eighth century, the same conditions of primogeniture existed for centuries. Turner suggests that sibling relationships were often hostile during that period: “Such hostility was not inevitable in families of feudal nobility” (89). Accounts like these demonstrate that families encountered a lack of wealth, infanticide, fratricide, and other bouts that resulted in destitution or death; however, in Edmund’s situation, he is more concerned about his situation as a person, a human being than as a nobleman because of physical and economic securities that he lacks.

Because primogeniture only accounts for the physical and economic security of legitimate offspring, Edmund finds himself in a troubling position, where he faces potential tragedy. Edmund is no different because he does not have the same securities as his brother. When Gloucester dies and Edgar takes over the estate, Edmund will possess nothing because of primogeniture. One of the motivations to solve his dilemma, lack of security, quickly is the trustworthiness of his brother, who would have the authority and the right to have him killed or removed from the household to fend for himself. Turner also explains, “[s]ome scholars conclude that neither Henry nor his successors sought permanence, that they saw this assemblage of principalities as a means of providing for their offspring, who would take their lands and go their own ways” (82). There was no financial and economic foundation set in place for all the

siblings because once the inheritance leaves the hands of the father, there is no assurance for equal division. Lack of assurance becomes a concern for Edmund. Gloucester does not care for him and the sentiment among other members of the hierarchy show a lack of favor or care for an individual who does not possess the same pedigree. Edmund does not seem too excited or Hebraic about allowing his life to remain in the hands of his brother who could very well remove or kill him. These beginning motivations start Edmund to consider his situation and shift from merely accepting his fate, to making changes that will place him on equal footing with the rest of the establishment.

The structure and control of the establishment feeds Edmund's frustration with the primogeniture-based society that sits comfortably in *King Lear*. All the main characters in *King Lear* that Edmund has to associate with are active participants in the establishment or are part of the hierarchy. At the top of the hierarchical structure, there is Lear who is the king and surrounding him are those kingships like the Kings of France and Burgundy, and the minor nobility like dukes and earls. These individuals symbolize and embody the power that remains constant in Edmund's world. Like any medieval court, these individuals have major influence through their authority. In his essay, "Primogeniture," C.Y. Cyrus Chu cites that "primogeniture rule has the advantage of establishing the line of control within the family, which is deemed especially important for rich and large families, and that the purpose of primogeniture is to *keep the succession line firm*" (80). Since the hierarchy perpetuates the long tradition of primogeniture, then there are problems that arise for Edmund because while his brother receives the adulation and respect of his peers, the illegitimate son only appears as one of the other offspring of Gloucester. Immediately, Edmund becomes the oppressed because he is that other individual that lacks the purity that each of those members swears to uphold through their titles

of nobility and traditional lineage. As the bastard son, Edmund is not in the same situation as characters like Goneril, Regan, or Cordelia. These children are products of primogeniture and the establishment, and they consent to its overall authority, an authority that Edmund considers unwavering and bothersome.

When external forces oppress someone like Edmund, this frustration leads him/her to find solutions to fix the problem. Unlike many of the characters in *King Lear*, Edmund is a character of severe action. He does not waste time, and he wants to figure how to make the situation better because as a human being, Edmund cannot consciously allow his place in the social hierarchy to fall around him. While he understands that he was born as a bastard, the acceptance of such segregation with the elite is unacceptable because as he proposes in his early speeches, he appears just as they do: “my dimensions are as well compact, / My mind as generous, and my shape as true” (I.ii.7-8). He makes these comparisons to himself because he understands that there is some sort of equality among the hierarchy and him. Both tiers of class exhibit human qualities and make mistakes, so logically he assumes they are equal and brings about this equality to fix his problem. Edmund is not so different that the system cannot afford him the same opportunities as his brother merely because he was not born in wedlock.

The only solution that comes from his frustration is to make the system work in his favor. Ultimately, the goal appears that Edmund wants all those individuals in his world that receive the same sort of oppression to achieve that security and respect. He clarifies his goals in the closing speech of Act I, scene ii: “I see the business. / Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit. / All with me’s meet that I can fashion fit” (I.ii.171-73). In order for him to achieve this goal, Edmund would have to thwart the control of primogeniture and those individuals that profess its application. As the proletariat, Edmund represents the working class and lower classes because

he suffers much in the same way those serfs and manor laborers do daily. The establishment refrains from giving them much needed respect and continually asserts their dominance based off an old, failed system that Edmund believes must end before the masses become too weak to fight for themselves. His journey as a character in the play shows him being decisive and unforgiving. In response, Edmund applies manipulation and deception throughout the play to achieve control. His Marxist aims help to justify his actions, but there is a human instinct that ends up overriding rationality because at the most extreme situations rationality becomes the last resort to solving a serious issue.

As his goals are set into motion, understanding his psychological motivation becomes the next mode to comprehending Edmund's actions. For Edmund, his rationality steadily dissipates and finally diminishes at the beginning of Act I, scene ii with his confession to destroy the hierarchy. In V. Lee Hamilton and Joseph Sanders' article entitled, "The Effect of Roles and Deeds on Responsibility Judgments: The Normative Structure of Wrongdoing," they analyze the relationship between acts of wrongdoing given the roles and deeds that particular individuals or actors perform. They concluded in their study that "role relationships had a direct effect on judgments; but more importantly, they interacted with variables characterizing aspects of the deed and its context," which indicates that even given other outside forces and also other variables, responsibility for one's actions could also fall to the hierarchy or authority (251). In the case of Edmund, his justification for his actions seems skewed but he notices the need for breaking down the system to make everything equal. The psychological study also mentioned that justifiability was a strong factor to consider because there are "situational circumstances that can alter judgment based solely upon the actor's mental state" (Hamilton 238). Edmund's situation could have been somewhat different if there were not as many external forces

narrowing his options. The hierarchy with their rigid control, his impending future that appears doomed, and lack of respect as a human being become strong factors in his overall quest to deceive and manipulate.

Edmund put his best assets to the test with the hierarchy, and ironically, the establishment succumbs to his ability to persuade and convince. The issue that he has to endure in the play is the conflict of social groups. Edmund stands as a class bender because he does not belong to the legitimate hierarchy because he was born out of wedlock. He does not receive the title and honorifics that Edgar would have or receive. The respect and adulation Edgar receives from members of the court do not fall on Edmund; however, he is still the son of Gloucester, which means he lives in the same environment as his father and brother. Living in that environment can be rather disjuncting because he is technically outside of the social class.

Edmund encounters different members of the same social class as the legitimate authority. By placing him in this same environment, Edmund suffers confusion because he does not know where he belongs in the social order because society sandwiches him between two classes: a subclass for the illegitimate, and as a pseudo-legitimate member of society. Emile Benoit-Smullyan argues in his essay, "Status, Status Types, and Status Interrelations," that there are different units and conflicts that arise from status relationships. He posits the connection of Machiavellian principles in a footnote with the struggle to obtain prestige: "Another and a more subtle method is buying or forcibly winning a favorable reduction in social distance through imposed intimacy or familial alliances and thereby participating in the high prestige status of others" (159). Edmund must consider his strategy carefully and he chooses to play on both tiers of society, preventing others from seeing his intentions. He essentially becomes a survivor of the social hierarchy through his use of manipulation and deception.

Edmund represents a check for the balance of control in authority. The authority did not demonstrate this resilience, and Edmund is almost successful in his mission. Critical interpretation of Edmund remains unfavorable for a number of reasons, but most of the analysis stem from his lack of morality and illegitimacy. Waldo F. McNeir bitterly closed his extensive essay, “The Role of Edmund in *King Lear*,” by arguing that Edmund was an ill-fated weak character: “The invariable in his character is his moral weakness, which he keeps to the bitter end, and no other outcome was possible” (215-16). Other critics like S.G. Kossick in “*King Lear*: Act 1, Scene ii: The Character of Edmund,” argue that his circumstances in the second scene primarily summarize his evil intent throughout the play. Kossick asserts, “Edmund’s approach to life is an entirely self-seeking and amoral one” (31). These essays are primary examples of the interpretation of critics that further diminish the character’s nature.

Both of these essays were published roughly two decades apart with McNeir published his essay in 1968 and Kossick published in 1982. One of the problems that seem to permeate in these essays is the insistence that illegitimacy is not an excuse for amorality. While it is understandable that Edmund’s actions are not positive and most of his aims are products of deception and manipulation, the critics must analyze his situation more. The period in which Edmund lived made it difficult to survive successfully as illegitimate because the system of primogeniture placed a strong emphasis on authority and establishment. Edmund exploits his illegitimate status when he falsely recounts Edgar’s statement: ““Thou unpossessing bastard, dost thou think / If I would stand against thee, would the reposal / Of any trust, virtue, or worth in thee / Make thy words faithed?” (II.i.66-69). Bastard children were a sign of weakness, and for Edmund, he falls in the same category as many of the bastard children, trying to prove

themselves to improve their situation. As such, illegitimacy is a justifiable reason for Edmund's actions.

As the character that represents a lack of morality, Edmund has a form of morality that answers his problems. Can critics justify or assert that Edmund's morality, given his situation, is not right? A human like any creature has to fight for survival, to continue to exist. Edmund fights for the oppressed but he also fights for his ability to live, and he applies his talents of persona and manipulation. He plays on his ability to appear from two different classes, and that ability works to his advantage. While critical interpretation does have a right to assess Edmund's actions, the ability to appropriate morality given his state of mind and given the situation he lives is complicated. He must do what is necessary to continue to exist because there is a high potential that he would die under his brother's rule.

King Lear, like many of Shakespeare's plays, produce struggle between classes and characters, and Marxist literary critics have noticed these occurrences. With *King Lear's* theme of irresponsibility and accountability of authority, it is easy to find Marxist viewpoints. Edmund's character appears most affected by the circumstances because he was born into a world in which he did not fit. Everyone around him accepts their fates and roles in the hierarchy, but Edmund lacks the complacency. He notices the need for change for himself as an individual to ensure his own personal safety as well as the safety of those individuals who receive the same sort of oppression. His work as a proletariat in the play, masking as a lowly individual, made his ascent to power much easier and subtler, brings his aspirations to light.

Psychologically, Edmund suffers from the disunity from his own base. He does not belong to the same foundation as the majority of the characters in the play because he is the bastard son. He lacks that respect, and among those constraints, Edmund looks for other

alternatives to justify his need for survival. Being part of a social group further complicates his problem because Edmund does not physically belong to one class, he belongs to two: the elite and the illegitimate. His lack of close association presents more problems because he does not know where he belongs as an individual. To fix his situation and create more equilibrium, he enacts his plan to break down primogeniture as a method to solving his problem. He achieves some success, but in the end, he suffers at the hands of the establishment because of their resistance to the change he promotes.

The establishment charges Edmund with capital treason, which prompts the severe penalty of death. He admirably accepts his fate. However, he makes a prophecy to the world as he concludes his own personal views on the hierarchical oppression. Edmund's repentance becomes not just atonement for wrongdoing, but also a foreshadowing of hierarchical destruction: "What you have charged me with, that have I done / And more, much more. The time will bring it out. / 'Tis past, and so am I. (*To Edgar*) But what art thou, / That hast this fortune on me? If thou'rt noble, / I do forgive thee" (V.iii.153-57). He delivers the truth that he devised these plans and ensured their successes, but he admits to doing more to the social structure than the audience or the other characters realize. He explains to them that as time progresses, his work will come to fruition, but he will be history when this result occurs. Then Edmund looks at this lowly individual, who ends up being his brother, and condescendingly asserts that Edgar is nothing. In Edmund's eyes, all of them have no higher prominence than on him because his goal for breaking down class and structure is so vivid. He appears lowly and obedient to obtain his father's title, persuades both Goneril and Regan to their deaths, and he orders a guard to kill Cordelia, severing the final three links to prospective sovereign authority and solidifying his goal. Finally, he closes his prophetic speech with an acceptance of their

apology, almost knowingly realizing that they will suffer in the end for their own deceitful and oppressive ways.

The journey of Edmund in *King Lear* takes him from a submissive character, to a social-political strategist, to a major manipulator, to a martyr for the working and lower class, and finally to the champion for the rights all individuals. Critics can have their amoral view of Edmund, but his actions suit the Marxist cause because humans can only stand by and allow wrong to occur for so long before they have to take action. Edmund took a stand and paid for it dearly with his life, but his ascension and goals to destroy primogeniture, and thereby eliminate class struggle, is a testament to the human spirit. Readers and scholars alike might see Edmund as a villain full of evil, but his actions and talents were necessary to ensure that future proletariats receive the respect and admiration that many before Edmund's time never saw or experienced. Readers must consider the complex life, emotions, attitudes, and motivations that surround characters when looking at a text. Shakespeare is a master at putting these situations together in his plays, but the audience and reader must make the final judgment, and as readers we have to ponder whether like Edmund, we could do what is necessary to ensure our own survival, or the survival of others just like us.

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