



# FAMILY 2018

## Obsessions and fears

notes taken from *RENAISSANCE DRAMA: ARDEN SHAKESPEARE* – BRINDA CHARRY

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## RELATIONSHIPS DURING THE RENAISSANCE

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there is evidence of many cases of broken contracts and pregnant women abandoned by lovers

- there was a high rate of pre-marital relationships in the time period
    - one out of every five brides was pregnant at the time of marriage
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## LEGAL MARRIAGE AGE

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- By law girls could be legally married at twelve
  - and boys at fourteen
    - but among most non-aristocrats the average age of marriage was the mid-twenties.
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## THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE

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marriage

- licensed relationships as an antidote to pre-marital relationships
  - was for procreation
  - but it was also for companionship and friendship
    - It was during the Reformation that this model of 'companionate' marriage came into play
      - The emotional bond between husband and wife was important and to be celebrated
        - in contrast to the Catholic ideal of celibacy and chastity which considered marriage between a man and a woman as a necessary evil
          - In spite of this shift, the idea of companionship between husband and wife never fully replaced the hierarchical model in which the husband was the authority and superior
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## MALE AUTHORITY IN MARRIAGE

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the Reformation strengthened traditional male authority in the family

- Both the church and the state reinforced the idea of the husband as 'the family despot, benevolent or malign according to temperament and inclination, lording it over his wife and children'
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## SYMBOLIC MEANING OF 'THE FAMILY'

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The family was itself a metaphor for the state and familial and socio-political order served as models for each other

- As Gouge stated, 'A family ... is a little Commonwealth ... a school wherein the first principles of government and subjection are learned'.

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## SOCIAL RANK IN AN EMERGING NATIONAL CONSCIENCE

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Social rank and status was an important issue in the context of Renaissance England's emerging national consciousness.

- the more modern Word 'class' did not exist in the period
  - and some historians would argue that one cannot talk of class in an era before capitalism,
    - however, people were still organised into...
      - 'Estates',
      - 'ranks'
      - and 'orders'
    - and there was certainly an awareness of and occasionally resentment at inequality.

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## HIERARCHY AND THE NATURAL ORDER

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Even as the various sections of society was seen as mutually interdependent, it was clearly not a relationship of equals.

- society was organised hierarchically,
  - and this hierarchy was viewed as a feature of the cosmos and nature
    - the natural order was seen as divinely ordained.
      - Consequently, revolting against the order was seen as challenging God.

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## THE FEAR OF THE BREAK DOWN OF THE NATURAL ORDER

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The almost obsessive emphasis on social order and rank implies that there was tremendous fear that it would break down.

- As DE Underwood writes..
  - 'fears of an impending breakdown of the social order has been common in many periods of history'
    - but never 'were they more widespread, or more intense, than in early modern England'.
      - Much energy was thus expended in reinforcing order to education, sermons and laws.

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## BOOK OF HOMILIES: A HOMILY ON DISOBEDIENCE AND REBELLION

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*The Book of Homilies is a two-volume collection of sermons issued in several additions (1547, 1563, 1571). The sermons were written by Protestant bishops and scholars and distributed throughout the country to be delivered by a local preachers. 'a homily*





*on disobedience and well for rebellion' delivers an important message on the evils of political disobedience. It is an example of the government using the church to spread political messages.*

As God the creator and Lord of all things appointed his angels and heavenly creatures in all obedience to serve and honour his Majesty: so was it his world that man, his chief creature upon the earth, should live under the obedience of him his creator and Lord: and for that cause God, as soon as he had created him, gave unto him a certain precept and law, which he (being yet in the state of innocency and remaining in paradise) should observe as a pledge and token of his due and bounden obedience, with denunciation of death if he did transgress and break that said law and commandment. And as God would have meant to be his obedient subject, so did he make all earthly creatures subject unto man, who kept their view obedience unto man, so long as man remained in his obedience unto God, in the which obedience if man had continued still there had been no poverty, no diseases, no sickness, no death, nor other miseries, where with mankind is now infinitely and most miserably afflicted and oppressed...

And, as God himself, being often infinite majesty, power, and wisdom, roulette and governors or things in heaven and in earth, as the universal monarch: and only king and emperor overall, as being only able to take an beer the charge of all: so has he constituted, ordained, and said earthly princes over particular kingdoms and the minions in earth, both for the avoiding of all confusion, which else would be in the world, if it should be without such governors, and for the great quiet and benefit of earthly men their subjects, and also that the princes themselves, in authority, power, wisdom, Providence, and righteousness in government of people and countries committed to their charge, should resemble his heavenly governments, as the majesty of heavenly things may by the basis of earthly things be shadowed and resembled.

What shall subjects do then? Shall they obey valiant, start, wise, and good princes, and contemn, disobey, and rebel against children being their princes, or against an discreet and evil governors? God forbid: for first what a perilous thing work it to commit unto the subjects the judgement, which prints is wise and godly and his government good, and which is otherwise: as though the foot misjudged ahead: and enterprise very healers, and must need to breed rebellion. For who else be the day that almost inclined to rebellion, but such haughty spirits? From home springeth such foul ruin of realms? Is not rebellion the greatest of all mischiefs? And who are most ready to the greatest mischiefs, but the worst men? Rebels therefore, the worst of all subject, almost ready to rebellion, as being the worst of all vices, and furthest from the duty of a good subject; as, on the contrary part of the best subjects are most firm and constant in obedience, as in the special and peculiar virtue of good subjects. What an unworthy matter work it then to make the naughtiest subject, and most inclined to rebellion and all evil, judges over their princess, over their government, and over their counsellors, to determine which of them be good or tolerable, and which the evil, and so intolerable, that they must need to be removed by rebels; being ever ready as the naughtiest subjects, soonest to rebel against the best princes, especially if they be young in age comma Women in sex, or gentle and courteous in government, as trusted by their wicked boldness easily to overthrow their weakness and gentleness, or at least sold to fear the minds of such princes, that they may have impunity of the mischievous doings.

But whereas indeed a rebel is worse than the worst Prince and rebellion worse than the worst government of the worst prince, that hitherto have been:, or to cure any little griefs in government, such a lewd remedies being far worse than any other maladies and this orders that can be in the body of a Commonwealth.

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## SOCIAL POLARISATION IN THE ELIZABETHAN ERA

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Some historians maintained that the Elizabethan era was actually characterised by increased social polarisation,

- i.e. The gap between the rich and poor grew wider.
  - While this might have been the case, social mobility or the ability to move up the status and wealth ladder was greater than ever before





- though perhaps still limited from our modern perspective.
  - Merchants became very wealthy; farmers who managed to acquire a respectable amount of land called themselves 'gentlemen';
  - the new humanist education brought many men into professions like the law and medicine
    - and gave them some claim to 'gentility'.
      - Harrison wrote that whoever is educated, 'can live without manual labour, and thereto is able and will bear the port, charge, and countenance of a gentleman, he shall for money have a coat and arms bestowed upon him by heralds... Be called "Master", which is the title that men gift to esquires and gentlemen, and be reputed a gentleman ever after'.

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## THE FOUR SOCIAL ESTATES OF THE ELIZABETHAN ERA

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Harrison has described the four social 'Estates' in some detail.

1. The first consisted of 'gentlemen' or the royalty and nobleman,
2. the second, of 'citizens' or wealthy city merchants,
3. the third of 'yeomen' or farmers owning their own land
4. and the fourth, of 'artificers' or landless labourers, artisans and manual workers.
  - The aristocracy felt in itself as not only superior to other classes but also as distinct from them both in blood and manners.
    - Many aristocrats were also better educated than in the past.
      - They were not just 'knights' carrying arms but 'courtiers' who could conduct themselves gracefully, display good taste and who could claim to be intellectually accomplished.
        - While most of the nobility lived off their estates many of them took on important positions in the government, were important players in politics and even invested in and profited from the new joint stock companies.

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## FEAR OF REBELLION FROM THE LOWER CLASSES

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- wage labourers,
- artisans,
- craftsman,
- servant and landless labourers,
  - both men and women, constituted the vast majority of the population.
    - They engaged in physical labour and such work in the period was...
      - 'tough,
      - monotonous,
      - dirty,
      - at times brutalising,
      - and affected by the whims of the weather'.
        - Wages were low and the danger of unemployment always loomed high.





- In rural areas, Enclosure Acts that prohibited the landless from growing crops or taking their animals to graze in what were formerly common land owned by the entire community intensified poverty.
  - Enclosure Acts lead to the local rioting,
    - but there was always the fear of large-scale rebellion by the lower orders.
      - It is true that the Elizabethan government established a system of 'Poor relief' to help the poor, which was paid for by a compulsory tax, but rural and urban poverty led to a large class of homeless people described as 'vagrants' or 'masterless men' who roamed the countryside and who were perceived as criminals and threats to the public peace.

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## A TRANSITIONAL PERIOD OF SOCIAL CLASS

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Overall, it was a period of transition as far as social class was concerned.

- There was deference to one's social superiors but also rising tension between the social groups.
  - While some scholars argue that drama reproduced and even celebrated the prevalent social order, others claim that it challenged and critiqued it.
    - It would be hard to resolve this particular debate.
      - Malvolio, the ambitious steward in *Twelfth Night* who wants to marry his aristocratic mistress, is humiliated at the end of the play,
      - but the protagonist of *Tamburlaine* is a lowborn shepherd who becomes a king.
      - Francisco in Webster's *The White Devil* (1612) contemplates the real meaning of rank:
        - 'what difference is between the duke and I?', he wonders,
        - and asserts that only 'mere chance' placed one of them in a position of privilege and power over the other (5.1.103, 106).
      - In *Philaster* (1612-13) by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, countrymen, citizens and nobles live together in harmony,
      - but the anonymous plays *Woodstock* (1590s) and *The Life and Death of Jack Straw* (1587-91) and Shakespeare's *Henry VI Part 2* (1591) depict rebellion.
      - The rebel in Jack Straw is simply a malicious role and the play clearly defends the prevailing social hierarchy.
      - Jack Cade, the rebel in *Henry VI Part 2*, is also a cross between a clown and a troublemaker,
        - but the play is more complex in its depiction of class relations.
      - The aristocrats in *Henry VI Part 2* are also corrupt and ineffective leaders who actually provoke the poor in order to serve the unpolitical ends.

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## HOW ACTORS EXPOSED RANK AND SOCIAL CLASS

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Actors themselves occupied an interesting class position. Originally branded as vagabonds, some actors, including...

- Richard Burbage,
- Edward Alleyn
- and Shakespeare,
  - made enough money to attain respectability.
    - Consequently, the players became a symbol of the new social mobility,
      - something that anti-theatrical writers found particularly troubling.
    - Actors 'desire to walk gentlemanlike in satin and velvet',
      - complained Stephen Gosson,
        - and 'proportion is so broken, unity dissolved, how many confounded'.
          - The fact that even the lowly actors could play kings and nobleman was even more troubling.
            - Drama had the potential to reveal rank and social difference to be a construction, simply a matter of good play-acting.

## Bibliography

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