ISSN: 2688-8653

Astrology as Contested Discourse in *King Lear*

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Abstract

Shakespeare's *King Lear* repeatedly invokes astrological imagery, above all the eclipses that Gloucester reads as portents of social collapse. This paper argues that Shakespeare does not use these eclipses to endorse any astrological worldview. Instead, through the opposition between Gloucester and Edmund, he stages a debate over whether human suffering is governed by celestial influence or individual will. Astrology in the play functions not as authoritative truth but as a contested and manipulable discourse. As a plot driver, Gloucester's reading of the eclipses frames the tragedy yet ironically exposes his credulity and self-deception. As a rhetorical strategy, astrological oaths to the heavens are exploited by characters such as Edmund to manipulate others. By refusing to resolve the debate, Shakespeare dramatizes a late-Renaissance moment in which astrology, newly challenged by scientific and humanist thought, survived less as a settled belief than as a discourse available for interpretation, persuasion, and self-excuse.

Keywords

***King Lear*; astrology; eclipses; discourse.**

1. Introduction

Astrology has been defined as one of the primary forms of "foreknowledge through the science of the stars, investigating the influences of heavenly bodies on the earth" [2] (Daston and Park 543). A solar or lunar eclipse occurs when the sun, the earth and the moon align in such a way that part or all of the sun or the moon is temporarily obscured. In astrological traditions, eclipses were treated as portentous celestial events. Ancient people frequently linked eclipses to political and military catastrophes, as in the case of the Athenian general Nicias, whose army suffered disaster after he delayed retreat because of a lunar eclipse.

Astrological ideas entered English literature long ago. The final book of *The New Testament* describes the opening of the sixth seal: "there came a great earthquake, and the sun turned black like cloth of hair, and all the moon became as blood, and the stars of the sky dropped upon the earth" [7] (*Revelation* 6.12). "The sun turned black" represents solar eclipse and "the moon became as blood" represents lunar eclipse, showing that early readers would have recognized those as signaling the end of the world. In English literature, Geoffrey Chaucer's (1343-1400) representative work *The Canterbury Tales* mentioned "Gat-tothed I was, and that bicam me weel; I hadde the prente of sëynt Venus seel" [1] (Chaucer 329), which indicates that people at that time believed that they were influenced by the stars at birth and would have certain marks on their bodies. And then astrological imagery appears prominently in William Shakespeare's (1564-1616) plays during the Renaissance. Here Shakespeare drew on a well-established tradition that associated eclipses with disaster. In *Othello*, when Othello has murdered Desdemona out of suspicion of her infidelity, he imagines that there "should be now a huge eclipse Of sun and moon, and that th' affrighted globe Did yawn at alteration" [8] (*Othello* 5.2.113-115). Othello believed that his decision to kill his wife was crazy behavior in a marital relationship, so it was sufficient to have abnormal celestial phenomena as omens.

ISSN: 2688-8653

Created later than *Othello*, *King Lear* offers a particularly rich but different example. At the beginning of the play, the Earl of Gloucester exclaims to his illegitimate son Edmund: "These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us: though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects: love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide: in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father" [8] (*King Lear* 1.2.99-110). These lines show his opinion that eclipses which disrupted the normal illumination of the sun and the moon signaled the collapse of the cosmic order, and this imbalance would influence the human world, triggering social chaos, such as the instability of the national regime, the collapse of ethics and morality, and the deterioration of interpersonal trust. But it does not imply that Shakespeare is a believer in astrology. Shakespeare's engagement with astrology in *King Lear* goes beyond mere support or rejection. By referring to astrological allusions, he raises deep and irresolvable questions about providence, the genesis of evil, and human nature [4] (Jensen 205-227). Based on Jensen's reading, this paper attends to astrology as a discourse that characters deploy and exploit rather than doctrines. After Gloucester voices the traditional astrological interpretation of eclipses, Edmund immediately dismisses it as "the excellent foppery of the world" [8] (*King Lear* 1.2.111). Instead of simply repeating that convention, he dramatizes the conflicting attitudes toward astrology during the Renaissance period. The play therefore turns an inherited ancient legend into a debate about human will and predestined destiny.

In the late seventeenth century, John Milton's (1608-1674) *Paradise Lost* similarly invokes the "dim eclipse" that "In dim eclipse disastrous twilight sheds/ On half the nations, and with fear of change Perplexes monarchs" [6] (Milton 18). Such repetition of believing astrology emphasizes Shakespeare's special usage, and therefore his astrological discourse in *King Lear* is more worthy of careful attention and exploration. This paper argues that Shakespeare does not use eclipses to endorse any astrological worldview in *King Lear*, but stages a debate, embodied in the opposition between Gloucester and Edmund, over whether human suffering is governed by celestial influence or individual will. The play refuses to resolve this debate, thereby dramatizing a late-Renaissance moment in which astrology, challenged by scientific and humanist thought, survived less as a settled belief than as a contested and manipulable discourse.

2. Astrology as a Plot Driver

Gloucester's astrological interpretation of the eclipses is one of the play's most important structural and thematic devices. Placed at the very beginning of the play, Gloucester's speech sets personal and family tragedy within a broader cosmic frame and introduces the theme of the relationship between fate and celestial phenomena, while arousing the audience's curiosity about how the plot will develop later.

The subsequent plot of *King Lear* seems to follow the pattern Gloucester predicts. The political turmoil of the kingdom is the most visible form of disorder. Lear divides the kingdom after being deceived by Goneril and Regan's flattery, which strips him of power and leaves him wandering in the wilderness. In the subplot, the family conflict surrounding Gloucester also becomes entangled with national politics. The Duke of Cornwall blinds Gloucester for the latter attempting to help Lear reach the French army. France's intervention, though ostensibly in defense of justice, only deepens the crisis, and the military conflict between the two kingdoms plunges the country into further chaos. According to Gloucester's interpretation of solar and lunar eclipses, this intervention can be regarded as the conflict of justice against evil. There is no doubt that internal power struggles and foreign war bring the kingdom to the edge of collapse. By the end of the play, almost all the major characters are dead.

ISSN: 2688-8653

The breakdown of family relationships in both the main plot and the subplot further illustrates the ethical disorder that echoes cosmic imbalance in Gloucester's reading. Lear's relationship with his eldest daughter Goneril and second daughter Regan becomes hostile after the division of the kingdom. Similarly, Gloucester is deceived by Edmund's forged letter into believing that Edgar plans to usurp his property. These betrayals of parents by children invert the expected order of filial loyalty and suggest that moral darkness has arrived. Sibling relationships, which should be harmonious under ideal conditions, are likewise marked by suspicion and hatred, as Edmund frames Edgar out of ambition and Lear's daughters turn against one another for power.

The last sign of disorder is the collapse of interpersonal trust. Lear banishes the loyal Kent for the latter protesting Cordelia's disinheritance, treating his protest as a challenge to royal authority. This banishment is clearly presented as an error of judgment. Here Gloucester's speech provides a perspective for interpreting such events—like the solar and lunar eclipse, the light of reason and justice is blocked by the chaotic surrounding environment. In this way, the play creates a tragic atmosphere in which characters may read political mistakes as symptoms of cosmic disorder.

In *King Lear*, "Shakespeare highlights how delicate Elizabethan society's fabric was by exposing the vulnerability of noblemen and parents to deceitful children's pillage" [3] (Huang 59-63). Gloucester attributes the cause of all the disasters to a natural event—the eclipse, paying no attention to the fact that those disasters are actually brought about by human deceit and betrayal. Gloucester's astrological interpretation provides a framework for understanding human betrayal, yet he mistakes temporal sequence of eclipses preceding tragedy as causal determination, while overlooking the specific human responsibility involved in these events. His belief does not reflect genuine foreknowledge but rather a self-deceptive framework that externalizes accountability. Therefore, Shakespeare lays bare a broader societal fragility: a world in which those in power, eager to find cosmic excuses for domestic chaos, become easy prey to the machinations of those closest to them.

3. Astrology as Rhetorical Strategy

Shakespeare employs astrology not merely as a narrative engine, but also as a rhetorical tool, allowing him to investigate how individuals, at both the intellectual and verbal levels, exploit astrological discourse to pursue their own purposes. First of all, the characters' different responses to eclipses are important. Gloucester's belief in the eclipses is shown to be exploitable. When Gloucester hears that Edgar has betrayed him, he treats the event as part of the disaster announced by the eclipses, instead of investigating the evidence to logically confirm his son's crimes or prove his innocence. By contrast, Edmund dismisses astrology: "This is the excellent foppery of the world: that when we are sick in fortune often the surfeit of our own behavior we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars" [8] (*King Lear* 1.2.111-114). Edmund attacks the habit of blaming one's misfortunes on the stars and insists that celestial forces are not responsible, placing his faith entirely in his own cunning and strategic calculation.

Edmund's opening declaration "Thou, nature, art my goddess" [8] (*King Lear* 1.2.1) elevates the authentic expression of human appetite and ambition to the very essence of nature. For much of the early and middle acts, this naturalistic logic proves remarkably successful. Through deception and manipulation, Edmund single-handedly destabilizes the entire kingdom, outwitting his father, his brother and even the King. Yet the irony is sharp: the very events Edmund sets in motion—son against father, brother against brother—fulfill exactly the predictions he mocks. His rejection of astrology does not free him from the tragedy pattern his father described. On the contrary, his self-reliant ambition ultimately leads him to his death. Shakespeare does not allow this purely biological naturalism to triumph, resisting reducing the

ISSN: 2688-8653

world to a heartless wasteland. In this sense, the conflict can be read as a dramatic engagement with Renaissance humanism's elevation of human agency. However, *King Lear* does not simply celebrate this shift from a cosmic to a human-centered framework; rather, it dramatizes the profound obstacles and contradictions that accompany such an intellectual transition.

According to the idea at that time, celestial disturbances such as eclipses were believed to affect not only the physical world but also the human mind. Some authors, following ancient ideas often attributed to Aristotle, held that the full moon could affect the brain and cause mental confusion [5] (Lilienfeld and Arkowitz 64–65). They thought that the brain, being largely composed of water, was believed to be influenced by the same lunar force that drives the tides. The word "lunatic" itself derives from the Latin "luna". This etymology reflects an older cultural assumption that insanity could be influenced by the moon rather than arising solely from internal imbalance. As a result, the moon carried strong associations with insanity and irrationality in early culture. This association provides a cultural context for understanding Lear's madness. However, such an interpretation ignores the overwhelming suffering Lear endures as a real living person. Lear's madness is primarily triggered by daughters' betrayal and the loss of power, instead of being manipulated or controlled by celestial bodies. Through this, Shakespeare tells the audience that people should face their emotions bravely rather than using astrology to justify psychological breakdowns.

The application of astrological elements also appears in the oaths and appeals that characters make to celestial bodies, revealing both the cultural authority of the stars as sources of witness and the ways in which that authority can be exploited. Lear, for instance, swears "by the sacred radiance of the sun, The mysteries of Hecate and the night; By all the operation of the orbs" as he disowns Cordelia [8] (*King Lear* 1.1.113-115), appealing to celestial powers to authorize his speech. Later, in conversation with Kent, Lear again swears by Jupiter to emphasize that his decision cannot be reversed. In early astrological thought, the configurations of the stars at a person's birth were believed to shape character and destiny [2] (Daston and Park 544). Celestial bodies were therefore regarded not only as influences but also as witnesses with sacred authority, which made oaths by the sun, moon or planets especially binding. Edmund exploits this belief when he falsely tells Gloucester that Edgar stood "in the dark, his sharp sword out, Mumbling of wicked charms, conjuring the moon To stand auspicious mistress" [8] (*King Lear* 2.1.39-41). Edmund has just mocked those who blame the stars for their misfortunes, yet he knowingly appeals to the moon in order to manipulate his father's astrological credulity. His deception reveals that astrology functions in the play not only as a belief system but also as a rhetorical resource available for exploitation.

4. Conclusion

The presence of eclipse imagery in *King Lear*, including Gloucester's reading of the prediction, Edmund's ironic fulfillment of it, and the oaths and deceptions that invoke the heavens all confirm that astrology, does not amount to an endorsement of astrology. Shakespeare does not use astrological language to assert any cosmological doctrine, but stages a debate—embodied in the opposition between Gloucester and Edmund—over whether human suffering is governed by celestial influence or individual will. Shakespeare thus transforms Renaissance astrology from a doctrine into a discourse that characters use to interpret events, manipulate others, and excuse themselves, but that ultimately explains no more of human suffering than the free will it supposedly threatens. By refusing to resolve that debate, the play dramatizes a late-Renaissance moment in which astrology, newly challenged by scientific and humanist thought, survived less as a settled worldview than as a contested and manipulable discourse. The play's ending offers no consolation, only the bare fact of loss, precisely because suffering can be explained neither by the stars nor redeemed by individual will.

ISSN: 2688-8653

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