

Illegitimacy as a 'Disability' in *King Lear*

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ABSTRACT

Ben Jonson's remark that Shakespeare is "not of an age, but for all time" reveals the universality and timelessness of the bard. Chronologically Shakespeare has been rediscovered through the culture of each age, the seventeenth century saw his plays as a glimpse of 'real life characters and situations'; the eighteenth century treated him as a lover of nature, the nineteenth century read him psychologically and traced the infinity of human characters. The first half of twentieth century gave importance to his form, use of rhetoric's, imagery and had a close reading of his plays. The second part of the twentieth century read him in feminist, New Historicist, Marxist and Post-Structuralist perspectives. These readings gave a paradigm shift in interpreting his characters. This paper reads Shakespeare in a New Historicist dimension and traces the modern concept of 'disability' which was prevalent in Elizabethan era. The modern concept of 'Disability Studies' is applied to Shakespeare's *King Lear* to trace how Edmund was marginalized due to his illegitimacy.

KEYWORDS

New Historicism; textuality; disability; illegitimacy; bastardy; natural.

New Historicism is an approach that advocates the parallel reading of literary and nonliterary texts of an age "The textuality of history and the historicity of text are given equal importance" (Krishnaswamy 84) The term 'textuality of history' means how the text unconsciously relates to the historical incidents of an age and historicity of text means the gravitation of non-literary texts upon the literary texts. The British counterpart of New Historicism is called Cultural Materialism which was coined around 1985. It is described as 'a politicized form of historiography' for classical texts like Shakespeare's plays cannot be read without relating the historical context in which they were written.

The term 'illegitimacy' is derived from the Latin word 'illegitimus' meaning "not in accordance with the law". An illegitimate child is one who is born outside the societal regulatory sanctions of marriage. Universally the illegitimates are subjected to hatred and exclusion: "Abandonment is his salvation, his exclusion offers him another form of communion" (Foucault 7). The illegitimates are grouped anonymously and are treated as marginal. They are made to feel third rate citizens and finally become a minority group who are always oppressed and alienated. Society prefers only children who are born within accepted marital norms. It blindly rejects and neglects the children who were born to those who break these systems. There are many controversies in punishing and

marginalizing a child who is blamed for its father's or mother's deviation from marital systems: "The bastard is a living symbol of illegitimacy" (Kingsley 1).

There were conflicts and ambiguities in the legal definition of bastardy. There are terms called 'general and special bastardy', the former deals about the parent's marriage before the child's birth and the latter deals about the parent's marriage after the child's birth. The 'general bastardy' was disputed, it could be tried in the ecclesial courts' but the 'special bastardy' could be tried in common law courts, since the Church does not recognize it as bastardy. (Burks. 112) The Church recognized only the birth of children whose parents were married, and no matter when the marriage took place. The illegitimates were deprived and denied of ancestral property, inheritance of land and throne. The canon law and common law excluded illegitimates from inheritance of property.

Disability Studies is a new interdisciplinary socio-humanistic field that emerged in the latter half of 1990s. It exposes how an individual's 'inability' is considered as a misfortune by the society. It shows how the society is treating the 'unabled'. As a sociological study, it is intimately connected with gender, race, class, custom, religion, culture and ethnicity. In the past disability was viewed medically, but at present it has been identified with political activity and a representation of how people are subjected to marginalization in varied spheres. The WHO defines disability as "any restriction or any lack of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being". Disability Studies is both interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary which includes History, Sociology, Literature, Political Science, Law, Policy Studies, Economics, Anthropological Studies, Cultural Studies, Gender Studies and Media Studies. Literature has been

perpetually obsessed with various types of disabilities. This new form of discrimination called "Disability" is operated through social beliefs and structures.

"If every performance is an interpretation, every interpretation, in a time of new media and unexampled cultural access, is also a performance" (Garber 270). Shakespeare's plays have given space to understand human life, human nature and human culture. Shakespeare can be read and understood in different perspectives. Every play is also a written performance which interprets the 'age' through characters. Shakespeare has crafted a variety of characters who are universal. Shakespeare's *King Lear* shows how society treats 'illegitimates' and how they are made disabled by the society.

Shakespeare's life time could witness a large number of illegitimates. A parish record reported that in England and Wales the average rate of illegitimacy rose from 1 to 3 out of every 300 people during the years 1565 – 1601. The illegitimates remained as a financial burden to the parish since they have to look after the illegitimates left over by the parents. Thus Pineblock and Hewitt wrote "left to keep at the charge of parish. . . . to the great burden of same parish" (206). In medieval periods the illegitimates were just considered as distinguishing children who were denied inheritance but were tolerated by the society. The sixteenth century struggled hard to accommodate the illegitimates; they were begun to be treated as 'others' by the society. The Early modern England completely excluded the illegitimates from economical and ethical bindings.

Shakespeare has dealt with many illegitimate characters in his plays. Falconbridge and Edmond are the major characters in the plays *King John* and *King Lear*; Don John and Orleanse are the minor illegitimate characters in the plays *Much Ado about Nothing* and *Henry the Sixth*. Shakespeare associates illegitimacy with

sociological and political movement which was prevailing in Elizabethan England. Illegitimacy has wide implications within Shakespeare's texts which exposes the stereotypical definitions of illegitimates in early modern England.

Edmund as an illegitimate character can be closely associated with and read as a victim of Elizabethan attitudes. He is depicted as a 'villain' and a 'negative character' who strives for 'power and status'. Edmund as Gloucester's son, has a different mother to his brother Edgar. The surface level reading of the play shows Edmund as a family member of Gloucester. Edmund too was sent for education like other legitimate boys, which is evident from the line "out nine years" (1.1:31). This shows that Edmund was treated equally as Edgar but in reality it is a myth

Gloucester introduces Edmund to Kent as "remember him hereafters as my honourable friend" (1.1:22). This creates an image as though the Elizabethan fathers treat their illegitimate children equal to legitimates. But ironically Gloucester refers Edgar as "Son, by Order of Law" (1.1:15) and refers Edmund as "knave" and the "whoreson must be acknowledged" (1.1:17). This shows the society's attitudes and treatment of illegitimates and how the legal system considered the illegitimate as 'Others'.

Edmund speaks more extended soliloquies to expose his alienation. Lear, Iago and Shylock also have similar soliloquies in them but they perform it for the sake of interacting with audience. Edmund speaks nearly 'eight' soliloquies throughout the play. In his soliloquies he describes in detail the horrible treatment of illegitimates by society, the rhetoric used to belittle them, how they were denied inheritance and finally he in his soliloquies devised strategies to attain power and social status. The first soliloquy "Thou, Nature, art thy goddess; to thy low" (1:2:1) shows his hatred towards Edgar and towards society which ostracized him.

"Stand in the plague of custom and permit" (1:2:3) explains the illusionary rules constructed by the society to degrade the illegitimates as John Stuart Mill observes, "Society can and does execute its own mandates" (Stuart Mill 3).

The final soliloquy of the play by Edmund reveals his passion for throne. To achieve throne he accepts the incest affair with Goneril. "And hardly shall I carry out my side" (5:1:50) Both Goneril and Regan were trying hard to win Edmund to satisfy their lusty love. But Edmund disliked both of them ". . . which of them shall I take? Both? One? Or neither"? [5.1.2]. Finally he accepted Goneril's bargaining to satisfy her lust and in return he demanded the throne.

Freedom becomes a defining characteristic of illegitimates since society provides no space for it. Edmund's action reveals that he is not content with the life his illegitimacy has given him. He is in a way trying to make a true and liberal status for illegitimates Edmund is clearly aware of his illegitimacy and his position in the state. Hence as an archetypal villain he has his own justification. He decides to steal his brothers and (1:19) Edmund defines himself as an alternative Edgar, a base version of legitimate child.

He takes Edgar as a model to fashion and identify himself. He describes legitimate children as a "tribe of fobs" (2:14) Edmund's desire, ambition and goal as a victim of illegitimacy was to become "Legitimate Edgar" (1:21). His concept of equality is that he should replace his brother Edgar in all spheres. Edmund disregards and mocks at the people who blame nature for their misfortunes: "On the sun, the moon and the stars . . . nature itself . . . excellent foppery" (2:1: 110-114) Through this line he defines himself as opposite and superior to Edgar. Edmund also attacks Gloucester's belief on 'planetary influence' as, "villains - fools - knaves, thieves, treacherers ... drunkards, liars and adulterers" (1:114-116) believe and abide by the law of nature.

Edmund informed the audience that he motivated himself and initiated himself to become 'natural'. Edmund argues that his 'bastardness' has made him to behave in a 'deviant' manner. The line "Edmund must have [Edgar's] land" (2:16) emphasizes the necessity and inevitableness of an illegitimate to inherit his father's property. He therefore eschews the law of society, refusing to accept the imposition of 'legal disability' on them. The society just marginalizes the illegitimates to the extreme which would turn them as 'vengeful' and 'negative characters'. Edmund becoming Earl of Gloucester – a motivated act of his childhood would be a remedy and a healing for the illegitimates which would never happens in the play. The entire plot

of Edmund can be read in single line "if not by birth, to have lands by wit" (1:165).

Though Edmund could justify his arguments and plots, it is an offensive action. Every individual has his own point of view for his doings. An individual should not take vengeance in his hands to restore his position. His arguments should be legal and sustainable.

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