

## ADULTHOOD'S TYRANNY: AETONORMATIVITY, YOUTHFUL RESISTANCE, AND THE CRISIS OF ADULT AUTHORITY IN KING LEAR AND A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the destabilization of aetonormativity in William Shakespeare's King Lear and A Midsummer Night's Dream. Aetonormativity is the idea of cultural and structural privilege of the adult as the norm and marginalizing the youth or elderly as deficient and deviant. This study juxtaposes the rigid patriarchal court of Athens with the highly aetonormative court of Lear. This paper investigates how Shakespeare stages conflicts between adult authority and youthful autonomy to expose the instability of adult centric power systems. This research is guided by three core questions. Firstly, this study concerns itself with examining how intergenerational conflicts reveal aetonormativity as an unstable structure. Then, it tries to uncover how the representation of obedience, silence and defiance challenge the aetonormative assumptions. Lastly, this study highlights the difference between the genres of comedy and tragedy in portraying Shakespeare's critique of aetonormative authority. The methodology of this paper relies on rigorous textual analysis and close readings of Shakespeare's plays. The study integrates the idea of Aetonormativity as posited by Maria Nikolajeva along with the broader framework of Critical Age Studies (CAS) to reveal Shakespeare's critique on the adult authority as the established norm. By reviewing myriad scholarly works, this study posits a unique approach to Shakespearean studies. The study concludes that comedy offers a temporary rupture in the aetonormative authority through the forest's liminal space. In contrast, the tragedy exposes aetonormativity as a failing system that both marginalize youth and others the elderly. The subversion of aetonormativity in the case of King Lear ends in death and destruction. The close textual scrutiny reveals that Shakespeare's drama suggest that true epistemic authority resides not in the adult norm but in the dismantling of the aetonormative structures.*

### **Introduction:**

Age has been synonymous with authority in the traditional hierarchy of the early modern period. Maria Nikolajeva draws this correlation in her idea of Aetonormativity. This critical framework posits that adulthood is considered to be the norm and all the other stages are measured against adulthood. This relegation of both the "not-yet-adult" (youth) and "no-longer-adult" (the elderly) reduces them to a state of marginalization, "otherness". This paper argues that in William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream and King Lear, the primary engines of conflict are the age-based power structures instead of being the mere backdrops settings.

Maria Nikolajeva's Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers (2009), is a critical framework to approach children's literature, in order to explore the children's literature written by adults, one can look for either reinforcement or challenge to the assumption that adult notions are considered the norm making the children's experiences seem deviant. This paper takes a unique approach to employ Nikolajeva's idea to navigate the age-based conflict in Shakespeare's plays, to see how Shakespeare reinforces or challenges the adult normativity assumptions.

Critical age studies are an interdisciplinary field that examines age as a social construct not merely biological. This paper utilizes Susan Pickard ideas in her "Age Studies: A Sociological Examination of How We Age and are Aged" (2016). Pickard's work is foundational in the sociology of age. She indicates how ageing is a social construct and age

identity is assigned by institutions, family members and society. She argues how old are marginalized and are often silenced.

By synthesizing Nikolajeva's concept of aetonormativity with the broader framework of Critical Age Studies, particularly Susan Pickard's idea of old as the "other", this paper will discuss how Shakespeare portrays a critique on the assumptions related to the adulthood being equated with moral or epistemic authority and the treatment of youth (aetonormativity) and elderly (othered) as the deficient.

Moreover, In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, aetonormativity is systematized through Athenian law, where Egeus considers his daughter Hermia as a "form" he has given birth to instead of being a self-actualized subject. He asserts a paternal right to her complete obedience. Here, youth is catered as a stage of legal and rational deficiency. However, Shakespeare subverts this notion by replacing and relocating the Youth to the woods. These woods serve to be a liminal space that functions like Mikhail Bakhtin's Carnival. In this liminal space, the adult rules of Athenian laws are suspended for the time being and the youth can exercise their autonomy over the rigid chrononormativity of the patriarchal city.

On the other hand, *King Lear* explores the collapse of the Aetonormative ideals from the opposite end of the life course. As Lear dispossesses himself of the "cares of state", he is immediately subjected to a decline narrative. Goneril and Regan, his daughters weaponize aetonormative logic to justify his exclusion or disqualification. They treat his aging body as a site of return to "second childhood" and they assume the role of the "adults", calling for their parental or adult intervention. This paper examines how Shakespeare utilizes the two distinct genres, comedy and tragedy, to expose the instability of age-based governance.

This paper addresses three central concerns. Firstly, how the staging of age-based conflict reveals the fragility and underlying hypocrisy of adult authority. Secondly, it explores the ways in which youth defy the epistemic Monopoly of the elders and thirdly, it focuses on the generic difference between the plays in negotiating the possibility of resisting aetonormative rule.

This research study moves beyond a simple reading of patriarchal power and argues that Shakespeare's plays function as radical interventions in the "life-course" politics of 17th century society. This paper posits that when the Aetonormative center fails, the chaos it results in, uncovers "adulthood" as an unstable state of authority or wisdom. Rather it requires a precarious performativity of power.

#### **Literature Review:**

foundational framework for this study is aetonormativity, a term coined by Maria Nikolajeva in "Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers" (2009). Nikolajeva defines aetonormativity as a power that treats adulthood as the norm while rendering the young as the "other" and deficient. She draws its parallels with the insistence on heteronormativity as the norm, an idea central to queer theory. Nikolajeva's aim is to make the readers "aware of the fact that adult norms and rules are not absolute" (204). Nikolajeva's study of various texts is highly insightful.

Moreover, Critical Age Studies (CAS) scholars like Susan Pickard in her *Age Studies: A Sociological Examination of How We Age and are Aged* (2016), explore myriad aspects in how age is constructed socially and how it is portrayed and challenged in literature and media. She focuses on age as a socially constructed system. She also focuses on age's intersection with gender and class. She gives the idea of an "age system" that is built on a "narrative of decline". In *Lear* this idea is utilized by Goneril and Regan to enforce aetonormativity on Lear. they "other" the elderly.

In Shakespearean drama, aetnormativity and age studies shifts the focus from simple generational conflict to a systemic critique of age-based hierarchies. It examines how these hierarchies are reinforced through legal and linguistic structures.

Furthermore, in the early modern studies, scholar Anthony Ellis in *Old Age, Masculinity, and Early Modern Drama* (2009) defines it as the "precariousness of seniority." Ellis argues that Elizabethan society was gerontocratic but the ageing body of the patriarchal figure may at times have undermined the authority they were supposed to maintain. Ellis's work focuses on the representation of ageing across different theatrical traditions.

Similarly, Lois Song-Yon Kim's research "Staging Childhood and Youth" (2002) focuses on how youth is the locus of tension in the early modern drama. The adults project their anxieties regarding religion, inheritance and social mobility onto the youth. The researcher argues how the child is linguistically and socially restricted by the father's authority.

To begin with, Jan Kott's seminal 1961 work, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* posits that Shakespeare's plays are not relics of past but are vital, living documents. In his essay, "Lear or Endgame," in which Kott draws parallels between Shakespeare and Samuel Beckett. He views characters like King Lear as facing a meaningless, godless universe rather than a traditional tragic fate. In his essay "Titania and the Ass's Head", he describes *A Midsummer's Night Dream* to be most erotic of Shakespeare's plays. He explores that the forest at night represents a passing through animality. In this forest, human characters shed their social masks and give in to primal, forbidden instincts.

Louis Montrose in "Shaping Fantasies: Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture" (1983), put forth a new historicism approach to argue that *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* conflict is rooted in a patriarchal system that considers daughters as possessions. He highlights the "law of Athens" utilized by Egeus to control his daughter, Hermia. He argues that the intergenerational conflict ensures the stability of social order.

In the same way Annabel Patterson in her, "Shakespeare and the Popular Voice" (1989) refutes the idea that Shakespeare was a supporter of hierarchies. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, she sees the legal reprimand against the lovers as the exercise of age-based power. In *King Lear*, she highlights that Lear's journey towards social justice is carried out only when he is stripped off his power.

Kathleen Woodward notes in "Telling Stories: Aging, Reminiscence, and the Life Review" (1991) through the lens of "pedagogy of mortification", she discusses that the conflict in the play, *King Lear* arises when Lear refuses to accept the social invisibility that comes with age, leading to a violent rupture between his self-image and his children's expectations.

"The Dialectics of Speech and Silence in Shakespeare's *King Lear*" (2016) by Bilal Tawfiq Hamamra explores the power dynamics between the silence of Cordelia and the absolute voice of King Lear. Hamamra argues that Cordelia's silence is a rebellion against a patriarchal linguistic framework. He also enunciates that Goneril and Regan reinforce the patriarchal ideologies of power.

In a recent 2024 study "The Archetype of King Lear: Power, Love, and Intergenerational Conflict" by Boris Kriger explicates Lear's "syndrome" to be the usage of affection as a tool for control. He describes the play as a tragedy of familial disintegration. He argues that the intergenerational conflict of the play is fueled by the father's fear of becoming obsolete and the pragmatism of young daughters.

Northrop Frye developed the literary framework of a "green world" in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) exploring how the world of laws is subverted in this Idyllic world. This green world is a world of transformation until the youth returns to the civilized world. In this green

world, the youth get what they desire and are reintegrated into the social hierarchy, it ensures the continuity of the adult-ruled state by this return.

Lastly, in regards to the generic criticism, Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) suggests that tragedy represents autumn as the fall of hero while comedy is the spring, indicating the rise of new society. He discusses that comedy is inherently a social critique because it ends with Hero defeating the blocking characters and restoring the social order.

Likewise, Raymond Williams' *Modern Tragedy* (1966) explicates that tragedy is a critique of the institution that fails the individual. It works as a price of the social change that occurs as a result of conflict. The reviewed scholarships indicate that Shakespeare portrays adulthood as an unstable system that must either evolve in the case of comedy and face a violent end in the case of tragedy.

While most studies treat *King Lear* as a study in gerontology and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a study of adolescent desire. These studies leave out the gap that, they rarely synthesize these two distinct plays to examine how aetonnormativity functions as a failing ideology that Shakespeare critiques through laughter and lamentations. Hence, this paper takes up a unique approach in employing aetonnormativity as the theoretical lens to study Shakespeare's subversion of adulthood normativity. Moreover, the lack of focus on "epistemic authority" of age is fulfilled by this paper, indicating how it is not just challenged by youth with the help of speech but actively subverted by the youth's ability to navigate legal and social performances.

#### **Methodology:**

This study employs a qualitative approach that integrates the Idea of Aetonnormativity as posited by Maria Nikolajeva along with the broader framework of Critical Age Studies (CAS) to examine the construction and collapse of adult authority in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *A Midsummer's Night Dream*. This research paper departs from the traditional studies and employs a comparative textual analysis of *King Lear* and *A Midsummer's Night Dream* focusing on aspects where aetonnormative powers are staged and averted. This methodology is grounded in a systematic review of authentic secondary resources, scholarly articles and books.

#### **Research questions:**

1. How does Shakespeare portray conflicts between adult authority and youthful autonomy to expose the instability of aetonnormative power in *King Lear* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?
2. How do representations of obedience, silence, and defiance challenge the aetonnormative assumptions?
3. How do the generic differences of comedy and tragedy represent Shakespeare's critique of aetonnormativity?

#### **Discussion:**

Shakespeare's plays dramatize the moments in which adult authority confronts the youthful resistance. Critical readings have approached these conflicts through the lenses of patriarchy or gender hierarchy. While such works demonstrate the power structures, they leave unexamined the assumption that adulthood itself is a power structure that guarantees moral, epistemic and political authority. The concept of Aetonnormativity developed by Maria Nikolajeva describes the privilege of adulthood as the normative position from which power emanates. It allows us to see how Shakespeare portrays obedience, silence and defiance to reveal adult authority as performative, contingent and unstable.

To start with, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, adult authority is exercised through law, custom and ownership. The opening scene of the play establishes the play's central conflict as the juxtaposition of law and desire, patriarchal authority and individual choice.

As Egeus enters Theseus's court with Hermia, Lysander and Demetrius, Egeus invokes Athenian law to assert his absolute paternal control over Hermia's life and her marital choices. "As she is mine, I may dispose of her" (1.1.43). Egeus really considers Hermia to be her possession that he can dispose of. Theseus reinforces the logic by inciting Hermia "To you your father should be as a god." (1.1.48). This is a classic manifestation of aetnonormative law.

Here the adults have the unquestioned authority, and even have assumed the role of God. The adult notions and opinions are the norm and young are seen as deviant.

In Hermia's case this adult control intersects with Gender as well. This moment also reveals the coercive nature of patriarchal law, that is the male authoritarian figure has over the subjugated female figure. As Niklojeva explains that adulthood is "the unmarked norm against which all other ages are judged". As a result of these double interventions, the love between the young couple remains subjected to social stability and male governance.

Theseus threatens Hermia saying, "Either to die the death, or to abjure / Forever the society of men." (1.1.67–68), he is invoking a legal embodiment of adult normativity. The adult normativity is enforced by the very law itself, instructing her to either submit to her father's will or face the consequences.

Here, obedience is being equated with rational maturity, Shakespeare, initially aligns adult authority with reason and youth with emotional access. He exposes the ideological work required to naturalize the age-based power. The threat of death or lifelong virginity reveals that aetnonormative authority is dependent upon coercion rather than any moral legitimacy. The fact that Egeus and Theseus have to impose such drastic threats upon Hermia reveal that adult legitimacy is gained through power control and forced impositions rather than being inherently good.

By showing the youth's resistance, Shakespeare critiques the rigid adulthood norms. He lets the youth come at the same par with authoritarian adults by depicting the two couples' escape from the Athenian law. Lysander speaks in court, "Why should not I then prosecute my right?" (1.1.107), he questions the very law that operates to suffice to adult and patriarchal authority.

Hermia similarly rejects the conflation of obedience and virtue. Her declaration, "Ere I will yield my virgin patent up" (1.1.82) asserts bodily and moral autonomy against paternal law. Such resistance exposes the arbitrariness of patriarchal authority, while age studies allow us to see how that arbitrariness is specifically anchored in aetnonormative assumptions about youth's incapacity for self-rule.

Then, according to Northrop Frye, in his idea of the "Green world", the forest in the play serves to be a place of desires. The character enters into the Green world and chaos erupts, echoing Bakhtin's Carnavalesque. The characters undergo love tests and affirmations, they are pitted against each other and ultimately the right person falls in love with the right person, all by the intervention of magic. The forest becomes the ultimate resistance to the adult-governed Athens. In this forest, the youth can exert their agency, they can escape the rigid Athenian law

and find a resolution to their love problems. Hence, the idyllic setting of the play functions as a site of resistance against the Aetonormative authority.

In the case of *King Lear*, a similar structure emerges at the beginning of the play where paternal and political authority merge. Lear's love test, "Which of you shall we say doth love us most?" (1.1.56), Shakespeare exposes the fragility of political power when it is grounded in vanity rather than wisdom. Lear tries to impose his Aetonormative power on his daughters by subjecting them to confess their love in elaborate manners.

However, Shakespeare is actually critiquing the adulthood norms revealing that adult authority is grounded in either flattery or straight up cruelty and it requires the youth's obedience to work. The scene begins with Lear's declaration of dividing his authority, the declaration seems orderly and rational but reveals political irresponsibility underneath. The seemingly rational decision turns into civil and political chaos. Lear's demand is both Aetonormative and patriarchal because he needs his daughters to publicly declare their love, transforming the private affection into public spectacle. As Annabel Patterson notes, such spectacles of obedience function to "confirm power rather than discover truth." Goneril and Regan readily comply with this power and use language in eloquent ways to conform to the adult's power while having no desire to continue this submission in the future.

Contrastingly, Cordelia's silence refuses to participate in this spectacle. This becomes the first resistance of youth against the aetonormative powers. As she admits that "I cannot heave/My heart into my mouth" (1.1.101), her plainness becomes the manifestation of an honest child in contrast to authoritarian adulthood. Cordelia's "nothing" becomes a tragic paradox because according to Lear, "Nothing will come of nothing" (1.1.99). Lear's enraged reaction to Cordelia's silence uncovers the volatility of power, power's need to enforce subjugation upon the people. Lear from a king and father becomes tyrannical who is incapable of tolerating dissent or difference, reveals the rupture Cordelia's silence gave to the aetonormative assumptions. He "disclaims" his paternal care and banish Cordelia and then Kent.

Similarly, another adult-youth dynamic in the play is between Gloucester and his illegitimate son, Edmund. Their dynamic is based on social stigma, legal exclusion and misrecognized intelligence. Gloucester fails to have a father-like bond with Edmund, leading him to be rebellious to the verge of being cruel and immoral. In scene 1, Gloucester jokes about how Edmund was conceived and reinforces Edmund as a social embarrassment for him. Thus public shaming becomes the establishment of Edmund's resentment. His bitterness is not innate villainy but he emerges from a system which assigns moral and legal inferiority to him from birth. Edmund's question "Why bastard? Wherefore base?" (1.2.6) reveals that the seed of resistance is already implanted in his heart. Edmund's resistance is also directed towards the Aetonormative assumptions that adults are always right.

He questions his father's hypocrisy and inability to establish justice even in their own family dynamics. Later in the play when Gloucester readily believes in the forged letter, his rash judgement echoes Lear's misjudgment of Cordelia. Here, Shakespeare seems to be questioning the very basis of adult superiority by showing the adults in the play as most susceptible to misjudgments and vanity.

Moreover, Edmund does not openly retaliate towards the rigid system but he feigns obedience and “perform” to be the sincere son. Similar to Goneril and Regan, Edmund complies to aetnormative powers by not revealing the whole truth, implying that truth is not welcome in a patriarchal and aetnormative authority. In contrast, Cordelia's response, “Nothing”, represents a refusal to participate in the performative requirement of Aetnormativity. Lear's authority like Gloucester's rely on speech acts that affirm their position as both elder and sovereign. Bilal Taufiq Hamamra in his analysis, argues that Lear's power is maintained through “ritualized language” which makes Cordelia's silence a threat to his epistemic authority.

Furthermore, Susan Pickard's idea that age is culturally constructed and elderly are marginalized is visible in Lear. As, youth is considered deficient in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and is threatened and coerced to comply with the authority. In *King Lear*, the elderly is marginalized once the children assume the role of the adults. It echoes the age studies concept of “return to infancy”. Lear after being stripped of his power becomes a second child and Goneril and Regan become the adults, the parents. They declare that “You should be ruled and led/By some discretion that discerns your state/Better than you yourself” (2.4.167-168). The fool calls out Lear for “e'er since thou mad'st thy daughters thy mothers” (1.4.176), the role reversal between Lear and his daughters is the indication that Goneril and Regan, in order to exercise their power, propagate the Aetnormative ideals. They in this case assume the “adulthood” and the “elderly” Lear has to submit to their will because he is deficient.

Lear too resists against this new regime of Aetnormative authority. His cries, lamentations and ultimate madness functions as the rebellion against the oppression of Goneril and Regan. His resistance at this point is verbal, he says, “He's mad that trusts in the tameness of a wolf” (3.6.16). He curses himself and his daughters, finally admitting his folly. Although the critique of Aetnormative assumptions is quite identical in both the plays, their genres reveal the distinctions as well.

In the case of Comedy, Shakespeare suspends age-based authority without destroying it and without this authority letting destroy anything else. As Frye argues that Shakespeare's comedy moves “from one society to another”, he explains that the characters move from the law governed society into the Green world where the rigid laws are relaxed, undergo a transformation and then return to civic authority.

Within this space, the concepts of rationality collapse. Desire, confusion and enchantment subvert the assumptions that adulthood guarantees control or wisdom. The carnivalesque spirit of the forest reveals that the resolution can even come from the chaos instead of the rigid adult authority. The return of the characters back to the society does not renew the obedience. Theseus overrules Egeus, he says, “I will overbear your will” (4.1.184). It demonstrates that adult authority must adapt rather than simply dominate. Youth's resistance ends in the subversion of aetnormativity without any destruction or death.

Maria Nikolajeva's idea of rupture is effective here, as youthful resistance creates a break in the normative order and exposes its structured nature. In the comedy, the adult authority survives, it adapts rather than being abolished. It relinquishes its claims to absolute epistemic superiority.

In the case of tragedy, it exposes the failure of Aetonormative authority whether in the case of Lear or Goneril or Regan. King Lear offers no metamorphosis which is capable of reconciling generational conflict. Lear's attempts to regain authority without responsibility rests on the Aetonormative assumptions that age entitles power. He is proven wrong by his daughters when they refuse to grant him any such authority. This results in the collapse of familial bonds and in turn the social order.

Goneril and Regan employ what Pickard calls the “decline narrative” to frame Lear's old age as irrational and burdensome. Regan's exclamation “O sir, you are old”, redefines Lear's age as justification for control. He needs to be led because he is old and is no longer the “adult” in control.

Raymond Williams' idea that tragedy is a social process clarifies why reconciliation cannot occur in Lear. This institution that sustains authority such as family, monarchy and kinship are too rigid to accommodate transition, unlike *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Lear becomes socially unintelligible through his madness.

Ironically, Lear and Gloucester achieve moral insight only after they lose the Aetonormative legitimacy, when they are no longer treated as adults. At this point, Lear recognizes the conditions that were previously hidden from him. He observes the “Poor naked wretches” (3.4.28). Lear's wisdom emerges not from age but from dispossession and real world experience. Through Lear's tragedy, Shakespeare seems to have put forth the idea that wisdom comes not with age or inheritance but with real and raw experiences. This marks Shakespeare's radical intervention. Aetonormativity not only fails to guarantee moral authority, it actively hinders ethical recognition. Lear's transformation reveals that true insight lies in the collapse of age-based privilege.

Across tragedy and comedy, Shakespeare exposes aetonormativity as a coercive and performative structure rather than as a natural hierarchy. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* exhibits a world governed by adult authority where youth is marginalized and silenced but Shakespeare represents a chaotic resistance through the liminal space of the forest which dismantles all such hierarchies. King Lear stages the catastrophic consequences of a rigid age system. Shakespeare locates moral clarity in silence, defiance and vulnerability instead of in seniority of age.

### **Conclusion:**

This study has discussed that King Lear and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* expose the instability of aetonormativity. Aetonormativity is the cultural assumption that adulthood inherently confers moral, epistemic and political authority. This paper highlights the generational conflict as structural instead of the incidental characteristics of these Shakespearean plays. This reading revisits and reorients the debates around patriarchy and obedience toward a deeper ideological problem. This paper foregrounds age as a legitimizing principle of power itself.

Shakespeare dramatizes the clashes between parents and children and rulers and subjects but it also interrogates the belief that authority flows naturally from chronological seniority. Shakespeare reveals age-based authority across the distinct genres of comedy and tragedy. He demonstrates how adult authority is performative, coercive and incapable of guaranteeing wisdom or justice.

The central contribution of this paper lies in its demonstration of aetonnormativity as the unspoken foundation beneath the early modern structures of family as well as law. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the law of Athens presents paternal authority as rational, ancient and morally binding. The legitimacy of the parental authority is dependent upon the threatened annihilation of youthful desire. In the play, Egeus's claim over Hermia and Theseus's endorsement of this claim expose a system in which obedience is proportional with virtue and dissent is proportional with irrationality.

The play exposes that adult authority is exercised and maintained through institutional force not moral superiority. Shakespeare's comic form lets this authority be interrupted. The couple's development into the forest suspends aetonnormative logic. This enables youthful desire to assert itself as meaningful instead of deviant. After Theseus revised the law, the play exhibits that aetonnormativity thrives only when it can adapt and absorb resistance and when it can withdraw its claim to have absolute epistemic dominance.

In contrast, *King Lear* stages the failure of such adaptability. The tragedy unveils the violence inherent in adult authority. This rigid system cannot accommodate transition, decline or vulnerability. Lear's authority is initially secured through ritualized performances of filial obedience and it collapses when the performance is denied. Cordelia's silence becomes the first fracture in the aetonnormative order, revealing that Lear's epistemic authority is dependent upon the recognition and appraisal from the young. When that recognition is denied, authority mutates instead of disappearing or even adapting. Then, Goneril and Regan reemploy aetonnormative logic through the decline narrative. They label Lear as irrational, childlike and excessive. Once the unquestioned source of power, Lear's adulthood turns into old age, a justification for dispossession.

The reversal of roles in *Lear* demonstrates a crucial insight this paper tried to establish, that aetonnormativity is a volatile mechanism of inclusion and exclusion instead of being a stable hierarchy. It tries to discipline all subjects in the play by associating legitimacy with usefulness, performance and conformity to adult norms. Lear's tragedy is not merely of personal judgement but in his misrecognition that the authority is not intrinsic to age. His awakening occurs only after he is stripped of aetonnormative privilege. Thus, Shakespeare stages wisdom as something that emerges when the aetonnormative systems collapse.

The comparative analysis of tragedy and comedy further clarifies the critique Shackles is presenting. As this study has shown, the genre is not just a formal distinction but it is a political tool. Comedy imagines the possibility of negotiating generational conflict as it temporarily dismantles the adult normativity and allows youthful resistance to reshape authority.

On the other hand, tragedy exposes the deadly consequences of putting off such negotiations. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the green world of Frye works as a safety valve that lets the youth resolve their issues without collapsing the social order. In *King Lear*, the heath offers only exposure but no relief. The generic differences showcase that Shakespeare does not offer a single solution to aetonnormativity. He maps its range of effects, from reformable to total collapse.

However, what unites the both plays are Shakespeare's incessant refusal to associate moral clarity with chronological seniority. Obedience is repeatedly highlighted as a tool of domination rather than ethical guidance. Silence, often associated with passivity, becomes a mode of resistance that protects truth from coercive speech. Defiance emerges as a rupture that exposes the aetnormative assumptions. Shakespeare redistributes ethical insights across age boundaries. He dismantles the presumption that adulthood guarantees wisdom and youth guarantees moral deficiency.

This intervention has broader implications for Shakespearean studies. Many studies have treated age as a natural backdrop with which gender, class and power operate. By countering aetnormativity, this study argues that adulthood itself should be understood as an ideological category because it shapes how authority is imagined, contested and justified. Shakespeare's plays do not merely reflect early modern age hierarchies, he questions them. Furthermore, this paper challenges the tendency to interpret *King Lear* as a tragedy of personal errors and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a harmonious resolution. Both plays engage with the same ideological structures. Comedy does not erase aetnormativity but reveals its instability.

Tragedy not only mourns but it reveals the deadly consequences of refusing to adapt to authority. Together, the plays suggest that any social order that needs legitimacy through age is ethically unstable and politically dangerous.

Finally, Shakespeare's criticism of aetnormativity is not utopian. It does not imagine a world without hierarchies or youthful autonomy as ultimately good. His plays insist on contingency of authority. Adulthood derives its power from performance, recognition and ethical relations and not from nature. When authority forgets this, it becomes tyrannical and when authority remembers it, it becomes flexible. Implicating wisdom in silence, vulnerability and resistance, Shakespeare offers a profound insight.

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