

The Two Worldviews in *Macbeth*

The Great Chain of Being and
the Wheel of Fortune

The Great Chain of Being



The Great Chain of Being

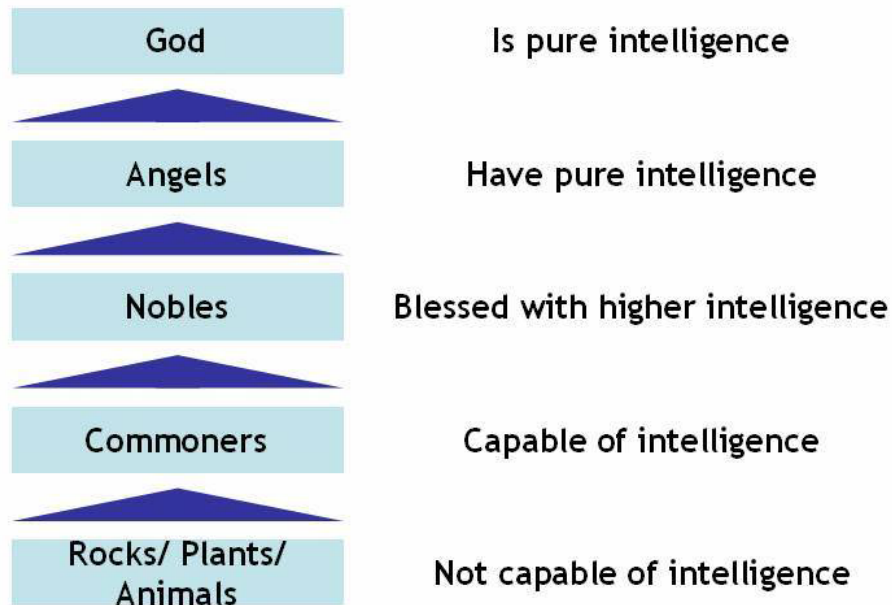
- The “Chain” is an ancient idea, but popular in medieval Christianity.
- It supports the notion that there is a “hierarchy”, or natural inequality, in God’s universe.
- In Shakespeare’s time, it was still popularly believed that people had to “know their place”.
 - Moving above your “station”, or marrying below your social status, was an insult to God.

Defying His Destiny

- Macbeth says this about fate:
 - “[C]ome fate, into the list/
And champion me to th’ utterance!”
3.1.71-72
- Hecate says this about Macbeth:
 - “He shall spurn fate, scorn death and
bear/
His hopes ‘bove wisdom, grace and fear.”
3.5.30-31

The Great Chain of Being

THE RENAISSANCE CHAIN OF BEING



The Wheel of Fortune



Selon raison et bonnes
meurs l'omme soy en
mercant en aucune fa

donnee a l'omme pour seulement ame
des on corrompre sa propre oemre. ans
mesmelement leist a chun de ce faire

The Wheel of Fortune

- A competing **ontological** notion was the Wheel of Fortune.
- It was cyclical rather than linear.
- The “Wheel” was a relatively pagan concept, popular in ancient Greece and Rome.
- The goddess Fortuna (or Fate) was fickle and unreliable; good fortune would rarely last. What went up had to come down!
 - J.D. Duffy: “Once on the wheel, no one gets off until the descent has been made...”

The Wheel of Fortune



Synthesis: Linking Chain & Wheel

- Scholars have linked the two concepts in the following way:
 - Those who ignored the Chain of Being, such as Macbeth and his wife, were throwing themselves onto the Wheel of Fortune.
 - J.D. Duffy: “A wise man would follow God’s law, and not surrender himself to fortune”.
 - This moral choice helps explain Macbeth’s tragic nature: he’s a noble man whose “tragic flaw” (A.C. Bradley) is **ambition**.

The Central Questions of *Macbeth*

- If Macbeth has chosen to forsake his place on the Chain of Being in favour of the Wheel, is this an act of free will?
- Look to the emissaries of fate and fortune, like the Weird Sisters. Are they determining Macbeth's path? Are they messengers or agents? Or is Macbeth choosing his own path?
 - “Men at some time are masters of their fates;
The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.”
(*Julius Caesar: I.I.139-141*)

Bibliography

- Duffy, J.D. "Introduction to *Macbeth*." *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. New York: Airmont, 1965. xix-xxix. Print.
- Bradley, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1904. Print.