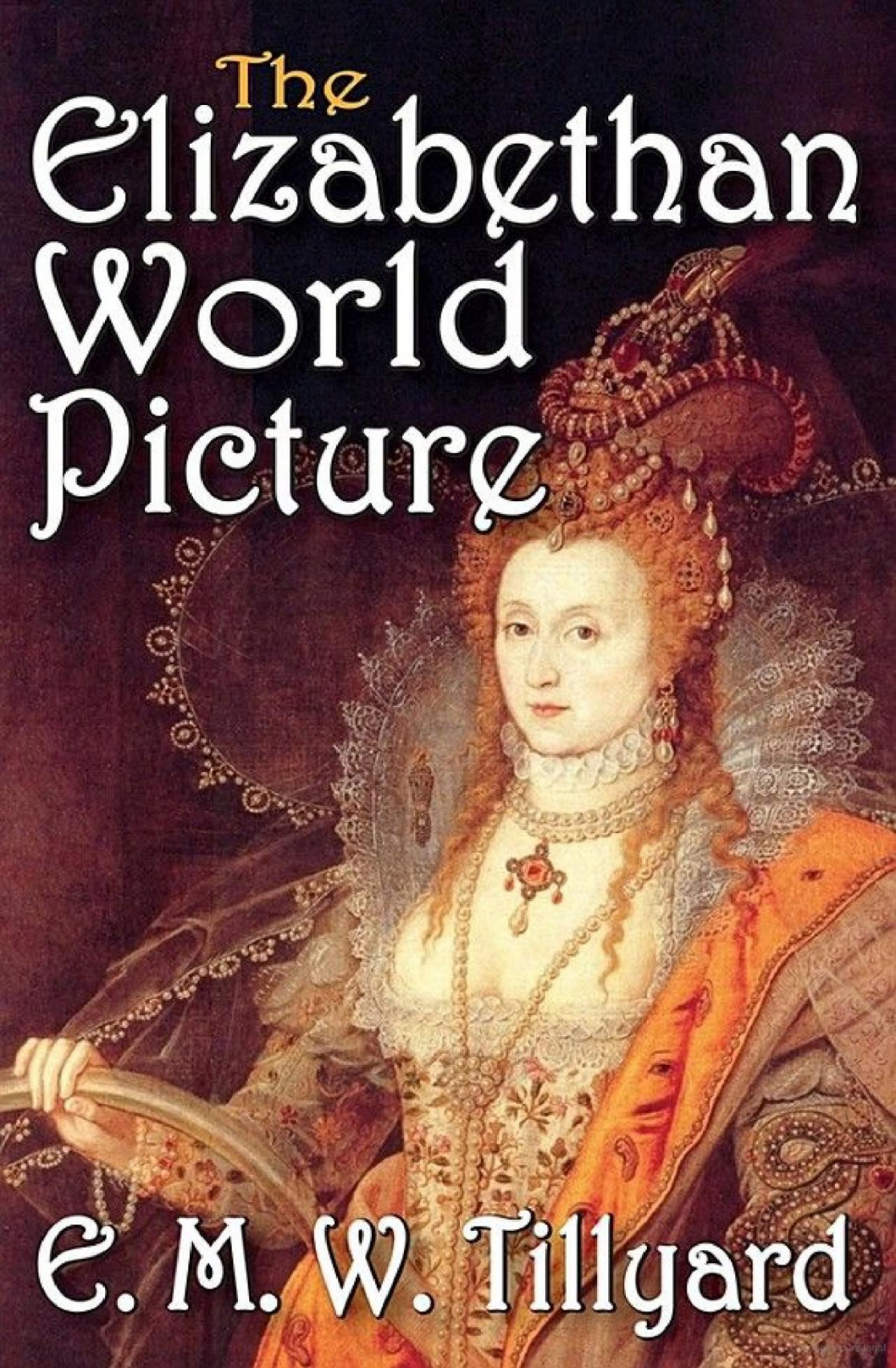
The Elizabethan World Picture



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Preface

This small book has come out of an attempt to write a larger one on Shakespeare's Histories. In studying these I concluded that the pictures of civil war and disorder they present had no meaning apart from a background of order to judge them by. My first chapter set out to describe that background. When it was finished, I found that it applied to Shakespeare's Histories no more than to the rest of Shakespeare or indeed than to Elizabethan literature generally. I also found that the order I was describing was much more than political order, or, if political, was always a part of a larger cosmic order. I found, further, that the Elizabethans saw this single order under three aspects: a chain, a set of correspondences, and a dance. Here then was a subject too big for a single chapter in a more specialised book, a subject demanding separate treatment.

Now this idea of cosmic order was one of the genuine ruling ideas of the age, and perhaps the most characteristic. Such ideas, like our everyday manners, are the least disputed and the least paraded in the creative literature of the time. The Victorians believed in the virtue of self-help, yet we do not associate the poems of Tennyson or the novels of George Eliot with the belief. They take it too much for granted. Of course if we read these works with the idea in our minds we shall find abundant hints of it. And to be ignorant of it makes us less able to understand these two authors. The province of this book is some of the notions about the world and man

which were quite taken for granted by the ordinary educated Elizabethan; the utter commonplaces too familiar for the poets to make detailed use of except in explicitly didactic passages, but essential as basic assumptions and invaluable at moments of high passion. Shakespeare glances at one of these essential commonplaces, when in *Julius Caesar* he makes Brutus compare the state of man to a little kingdom. The comparison of man to the state or "body politic" was as fundamental to the Elizabethans as the belief in self-help was to the Victorians.

My object then is to extract and expound the most ordinary beliefs about the constitution of the world as pictured in the Elizabethan age and through this exposition to help the ordinary reader to understand and to enjoy the great writers of the age. In attempting this I have incidentally brought together a number of pieces of elementary lore which I have not found assembled elsewhere. This book may actually be a convenient factual aid to the bare construing of some of Spenser or Donne or Milton.

Though I have mainly expounded, I have sometimes drawn conclusions, and I have illustrated the way a belief passed into the literature of the time. As I write for the ordinary reader not the specialist I have used the best known writers for such illustration. On the other hand when I am setting forth an actual doctrine I do not avoid illustrating from unfamiliar writers. It has been impossible always to distinguish between these two kinds of illustration; and the reader must not be surprised if he finds a piece of Shakespeare or Milton used simultaneously to state a doctrine and to exemplify the use poetry can make of it.

I must warn readers that some of the facts are only approximate. There were many variations of opinion about the way the universe was constituted impossible to record in a short book. I have done my best to choose always the most usual opinion. If any specialist in the period reads this book, I hope he may agree with me that the doctrines I have expounded are all sufficiently commonplace and may find that as few as possible of the relevant commonplaces have escaped me.

It is unfortunate that the facts with which I have to deal, though all equally familiar to an Elizabethan, are not so to a modern. A part, like the four humours, is familiar, even to distress; but a part, like the notion of the "vast chain of being," will be new to the ordinary reader. As in a short account proportion is everything, I cannot allow degrees of familiarity to dictate the space or the emphasis I give to different matters. First things must have first place. And if I speak of stale things as if they were fresh and obscure things as if they were known, it is to preserve the proportions in which I imagine the Elizabethans saw them all.

In quoting I have thought of the ordinary reader's convenience and have modernised spelling and punctuation, except for Milton. Milton took great care over these things and hardly suffers in intelligibility from having them preserved.

I sometimes use the word Elizabethan with great laxity, meaning anything within the compass of the English Renaissance, anything between the ages of Henry VIII and Charles I akin to the main trends of Elizabethan thought.

My thanks are due to friends who have put me on to references I might have missed: to Miss E. E. H. Welsford,

M.A., Fellow of Newnham College, to Miss R. Freeman, Ph.D., Girton College, Lecturer at Birkbeck College, to Professor Theodore Spencer, Ph.D., of Trinity College Cambridge and Harvard University, and to Mr. Donald Gordon, Ph.D., of Edinburgh University and Trinity College Cambridge.

Finally I must pay my tribute to recent American work on Renaissance thought; work the cumulative magnitude of which is not always recognised in England. I mean, for instance, that of the late Edwin Greenlaw and his associates or of Professor Charles G. Osgood and the other editors of the Variorum Spenser. Without this work I should not have dared to generalise as I have done.

I regret that Professor Theodore Spencer's *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man,* New York, 1942, reached me after my text was in type. We have been writing, independently, of some of the same things, and I wish I could have made many references to this book. All I can do now is refer generally to the learning and the charm with which he develops his theme.

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THE ELIZABEZTHAN WORLD PICTURE

One

Introductory

People still think of the Age of Elizabeth as a secular period between two outbreaks of Protestantism: a period in which religious enthusiasm was sufficiently dormant to allow the new humanism to shape our literature. They admit indeed that the quiet was precarious and that the Puritans were ever on the alert. But they allow the emphasis to be on the Queen's political intuitions, the voyages of discovery, and the brilliant externals of Elizabethan life. The first pages of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* are in these matters typical. They do not tell us that Queen Elizabeth translated Boethius, that Raleigh was a theologian as well as a discoverer, and that sermons were as much a part of an ordinary Elizabethan's life as bear-baiting. The way Hamlet's words on man are often taken will illustrate this habit of mind.

> What a piece of work is a man: how noble in reason; how infinite in faculty; in form and moving how express and

admirable; in action how like an angel; in apprehension how like a god; the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals.

This has been taken as one of the great English versions of Renaissance humanism, an assertion of the dignity of man against the asceticisms of medieval misanthropy. Actually it is in the purest medieval tradition: Shakespeare's version of the orthodox encomia of what man, created in God's image, was like in his prelapsarian state and of what ideally he is still capable of being. It also shows Shakespeare placing man in the traditional cosmic setting between the angels and the beasts. It was what the theologians had been saying for centuries. Here is a typical version, by Nemesius, a Syrian bishop of the fourth century, in George Wither's translation:

> No eloquence may worthily publish forth the manifold pre-eminences and advantages which are bestowed on this creature. He passeth over the vast seas; he rangeth about the wide heavens by his contemplation and conceives the motions and magnitudes of the stars. . . . He is learned in every science and skilful in artificial workings. . . . He talketh with angels yea with God himself. He hath all the creatures within his dominion.

What is true of Hamlet on man is in the main true of Elizabethan modes of thought in general.

The thing that *Orlando* (and for that matter *Shakespeare's England* taken all in all) misses is that the Puritans and the courtiers were more united by a common theological bond than they were divided by ethical disagreements. They had in common a mass of basic assumptions about the world, which

they never disputed and whose importance varied inversely with this very meagreness of controversy.

Coming to the world picture itself, one can say dogmatically that it was still solidly theocentric, and that it was a simplified version of a much more complicated medieval picture. Now the Middle Ages derived their world picture from an amalgam of Plato and the Old Testament, invented by the Jews of Alexandria and vivified by the new religion of Christ. It was unlike paganism (apart from Platonism and some mystery cults) in being theocentric, and it resembled Platonism and other theocentric cults in being perpetually subjected to the conflicting claims of this and another world. To hold that the other world, because so persistently advertised, had it all its own way in the experience of medieval thinkers is as simple-minded as to hold that all Germans are merciless because their leaders have ordered them to be so, or that England must have indeed been merry between the two wars because of all the incitements by theatre or wayside pulpit to be cheerful. On reflection we can only conclude that many Germans must be obstinately kind to need such orders and that many Englishmen refused to be comforted to need such advice. Those who know most about the Middle Ages now assure us that humanism and a belief in the present life were powerful by the twelfth century, and that exhortations to contemn the world were themselves powerful at that time for that very reason. The two contradictory principles co-existed in a state of high tension. Further it is an error to think that with the Renaissance the belief in the present life won a definitive victory. Till recently Petrarch's imaginary dialogue between himself and St. Augustine, known as his *Secret,* was thought to

typify the transition from Middle Ages to Renaissance because it deals with this same conflict as if there might be a doubt about the result. Actually it does not differ greatly in spirit from the most popular of all moral treatises during the Middle Ages, the dialogue Boethius held between himself and Divine Philosophy; it shows no slackening of ardour in presenting the old arguments for despising the world. Indeed from Augustine himself through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, through the Elizabethans to Donne and Milton, the old arguments persisted. The Duke's exhortation to Claudio in *Measure for Measure,* "Be absolute for death," is an epitome of medieval homilies on the contempt of the world. And when Boethius calls the love of fame "the one thing that could allure geniuses outstanding but not yet quite perfected in virtue" and Milton calls it "that last infirmity of noble mind," the truth is not that Milton was copying Boethius but that he was giving his own version of the perpetual struggle. The conclusion then is that, though there were various new things in the Elizabethan age to make life exciting, the old struggle between the claims of two worlds persisted and that to look on this age as mainly secular is wrong.

The world picture which the Middle Ages inherited was that of an ordered universe arranged in a fixed system of hierarchies but modified by man's sin and the hope of his redemption. The same energy that carried through their feats of architecture impelled them to elaborate this inherited picture. Everything had to be included and everything had to be made to fit and to connect. For instance, it would not do to enjoy the *Aeneid* as the epic of Augustan Rome: the poem had to be fitted into the current theological scheme and was interpreted as an allegory of the human soul from birth to

death. Once invented, the conventions of courtly love had to be given their precise value in the total scheme. Thus Launcelot, the perfect courtly lover, is the champion of chivalry but is denied the vision of the Grail: the limits of his possible virtue are precisely set.

Typical of much medieval elaboration and precise correspondence of detail was the habit of acting in accordance with the position of the planets. There is a good popular exposition of this in the first chapter of J. L. Lowes's *Geoffrey Chaucer.* From the astronomer Ptolemy the Middle Ages derived the custom of associating certain classes of people with certain planets. Further, they allotted to a single planet every hour of the week: What use they put these notions to can be seen in the third part of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale,* where Palamon Emily and Arcite visit the temples of Venus Diana and Mars. This they do at exactly the hours appropriated to these planetary divinities. For Palamon to have prayed to Venus in an hour appropriated to Mercury would be profane indecent and perilous. In the fourth book of Ptolemy's astronomical treatise we read that Mars, in aspect with the sun, makes his subjects those who use fire in their crafts, such as cooks moulders cauterisers smiths workers in mines. Hence, when on the temple of Mars Chaucer puts the picture of

> The cook y-scalded for al his longe ladel,

he is being scrupulously correct.

One is tempted to call the medieval habit of life mathematical or to compare it with a gigantic game where

everything is included and every act is conducted under the most complicated system of rules.

Ultimately the game grew over-complicated and was too much for people. But it is a mistake to think that it was changed. Protestantism was largely a selection and a simplification of what was there all the time. It mattered little to the sublime scheme of Augustinian and Thomist theology if indulgences for instance were done away with. And the universe was still an order, even if men forgot many of the details of its internal concatenations. The kind of thing that had happened can be seen by comparing the above Chaucerian scene with its parallel in the *Two Noble Kinsmen,* almost certainly an example of Shakespeare's very latest work. Here there is no trace of Chaucer's astronomical detail. Yet it mentions, and with effective solemnity, one of the great medieval commonplaces, the one already hinted at in Brutus's speech. Arcite prays to Mars:

> O great corrector of enormous times,
> Shaker of o'er-rank states, thou grand decider
> Of dusty and old titles, that heal'st with blood
> The earth when it is sick, and cur'st the world
> O' the plurisy of people.

Here war is presented as part of the great cosmic scene and is secured in its place by being to the body politic as the medical operation of blood-letting is to the human body. Not that many details of the old correspondences did not linger on: they did, but often like the Punch and Judy show to-day, bereft of ancestral dignity. This, for instance, from *Twelfth Night* is what survives in Shakespeare of the medieval

correspondence between parts of the body and the constellations:

Sir Toby Belch. I did think by the excellent constitution of thy leg it was formed under the star of a galliard.

Sir Andrew Aguecheek. Ay, 'tis strong, and it does indifferently well in a flame-coloured stock. Shall we set about some revels?

Sir Tob. What shall we do else? were we not born under Taurus?

Sir And. Taurus: that's sides and heart.

Sir Tob. No, sir, it is legs and thighs.

Characteristically both speakers are made to get the association wrong; and Shakespeare probably knew that to Taurus were assigned the neck and throat. There is irony in Sir Toby's being right in a way he did not mean. He meant to refer to dancing—legs and thighs—but the drinking implied by neck and throat is just as apt to the proposed revels. The present point is that the serious and ceremonious game of the Middle Ages has degenerated into farce.

But though the general medieval picture of the world survived in outline into the Elizabethan age, its existence was by then precarious. There had been Machiavelli, to whom the idea of a universe divinely ordered throughout was repugnant, and in the seventeenth century men began to understand and heed and not merely to travesty and abuse him. Recent research has shown that the educated Elizabethan had plenty of text-books in the vernacular instructing him in the Copernican astronomy, yet he was loth to upset the old order by applying his knowledge. The new

commercialism was hostile to medieval stability. The greatness of the Elizabethan age was that it contained so much of new without bursting the noble form of the old order. It is here that the Queen herself comes in. Somehow the Tudors had inserted themselves into the constitution of the medieval universe. They were part of the pattern and they made themselves indispensable. If they were to be preserved, it had to be as part of this pattern. It was a serious matter not a mere fancy if an Elizabethan writer compared Elizabeth to the *primum mobile,* the master-sphere of the physical universe, and every activity within the realm to the varied motions of the other spheres governed to the last fraction by the influence of their container.

Two

Order

Those (and they are at present the majority) who take their notion of the Elizabethan age principally from the drama will find it difficult to agree that its world picture was ruled by a general conception of order, for at first sight that drama is anything but orderly. However, people are beginning to perceive that this drama was highly stylised and conventional, that its technical licenses are of certain kinds and fall into a pattern, that its extravagant sentiments are repetitions and not novelties; that it may after all have its own, if queer, regulation. Actually the case is such as I have described in my preface: the conception of order is so taken for granted, so much part of the collective mind of the people, that it is hardly mentioned except in explicitly didactic passages. It is not absent from non-didactic writing, for it appears in Spenser's *Hymn of Love* and in Ulysses's speech on "degree" in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida.* It occurs frequently in didactic prose: in Elyot's *Governor,* the

Church Homily *Of Obedience,* the first book of Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity,* and the preface to Raleigh's *History of the World.* Shakespeare's version is the best known. For this reason and because its full scope is not always perceived I begin with it.

> The heavens themselves, the planets, and this centre
> Observe degree priority and place
> Insisture course proportion season form
> Office and custom, in all line of order;
> And therefore is the glorious planet Sol
> In noble eminence enthron'd and spher'd
> Amidst the other, whose med'cinable eye
> Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil
> And posts like the commandment of a king,
> Sans check, to good and bad. But when the planets
> In evil mixture to disorder wander,
> What plagues and what portents, what mutiny,
> What raging of the sea, shaking of earth,
> Commotion in the winds, frights changes horrors,
> Divert and crack, rend and deracinate
> The unity and married calm of states
> Quite from their fixure. Oh, when degree is shak'd,
> Which is the ladder to all high designs,
> The enterprise is sick. How could communities,
> Degrees in schools and brotherhoods in cities,
> Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,
> The primogenitive and due of birth,
> Prerogative of age, crowns sceptres laurels,
> But by degree stand in authentic place?
> Take but degree away, untune that string,

And hark, what discord follows. Each thing meets
In mere oppugnancy. The bounded waters
Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores
And make a sop of all this solid globe.
Strength should be lord to imbecility,
And the rude son should strike his father dead.
This chaos, when degree is suffocate,
Follows the choking.

Much of what I have to expound is contained in this passage, and I shall revert to its details later. The point here is that so many things are included simultaneously within this "degree" or order, and so strong a sense is given of their interconnections. The passage is at once cosmic and domestic. The sun, the king, primogeniture hang together; the war of the planets is echoed by the war of the elements and by civil war on earth; the homely brotherhoods or guilds in cities are found along with an oblique reference to creation out of the confusion of chaos. Here is a picture of immense and varied activity, constantly threatened with dissolution, and yet preserved from it by a superior unifying power. The picture, however, though so rich, is not complete. There is nothing about God and the angels, nothing about animals vegetables and minerals. For Shakespeare's dramatic purposes he brought in quite enough, but it would be wrong to think that he did not mean to imply the two extremes of creation also or that he would have disclaimed the following account of "degree": Raleigh, after enlarging on the joys of heaven, which will make any earthly joy negligible, continues,

Shall we therefore value honour and riches at nothing and neglect them as unnecessary and vain? Certainly no. For that infinite wisdom of God, which hath distinguished his angels by degrees, which hath given greater and less light and beauty to heavenly bodies, which hath made differences between beasts and birds, created the eagle and the fly, the cedar and the shrub, and among stones given the fairest tincture to the ruby and the quickest light to the diamond, hath also ordained kings, dukes or leaders of the people, magistrates, judges, and other degrees among men.

One of the clearest expositions of order (and close to Shakespeare's though a good deal earlier in date) is Elyot's in the first chapter of the *Governor.* It has this prominent place because order is the condition of all that follows; for of what use to educate the magistrate without the assurance of a coherent universe in which he can do his proper work?

Take away order from all things, what should then remain? Certes nothing finally, except some man would imagine eftsoons chaos. Also where there is any lack of order needs must be perpetual conflict. And in things subject to nature nothing of himself only may be nourished; but, when he hath destroyed that wherewith he doth participate by the order of his creation, he himself of necessity must then perish; whereof ensueth universal dissolution.

Hath not God set degrees and estates in all his glorious works? First in his heavenly ministers, whom he hath constituted in divers degrees called hierarchies. Behold the four elements, whereof the body of man is compact, how they be set in their places called spheres, higher or lower

according to the sovereignty of their natures. Behold also the order that God hath put generally in all his creatures, beginning at the most inferior or base and ascending upward. He made not only herbs to garnish the earth but also trees of a more eminent stature than herbs. Semblably in birds beasts and fishes some be good for the sustenance of man, some bear things profitable to sundry uses, other be apt to occupation and labour. Every kind of trees herbs birds beasts and fishes have a peculiar disposition appropered unto them by God their creator; so that in everything is order, and without order may be nothing stable or permanent. And it may not be called order except it do contain in it degrees, high and base, according to the merit or estimation of the thing that is ordered.

This is all very explicit and prosaic. It is what everyone believed in Elizabeth's days and it is *all* there behind such poetic statements of order as the following from Spenser's *Hymn of Love* describing creation:

> The earth the air the water and the fire
> Then gan to range themselves in huge array
> And with contrary forces to conspire
> Each against other by all means they may,
> Threat'ning their own confusion and decay:
> Air hated earth and water hated fire,
> Till Love relented their rebellious ire.
>
> He then them took and, tempering goodly well
> Their contrary dislikes with loved means,
> Did place them all in order and compel
> To keep themselves within their sundry reigns

Together linkt with adamantine chains;
Yet so as that in every living wight

They mix themselves and show their kindly might.
So ever since they firmly have remained
And duly well observed his behest,
Through which now all these things that are contained
Within this goodly cope, both most and least,
Their being have.

The conception of order described above must have been common to all Elizabethans of even modest intelligence. Hooker's elaborated account must have stated pretty fairly the preponderating conception among the educated. Hooker is not easy reading to a modern but would have been much less difficult to a contemporary used to his kind of prose. He writes not for the technical theologian but mediates theology to the general educated public of his day. He is master of the sort of summary which, though it avoids irksome and controversial detail, presents the general and the simplified with consummate force and freshness. He has the acutest sense of what the ordinary educated man can grasp and having grasped ratify. It is this tact that assures us that he speaks for the educated nucleus that dictated the current beliefs of the Elizabethan Age. He represents far more truly the background of Elizabethan literature than do the coney-catching pamphlets or the novel of low life.

Hooker's version is of course avowedly theological and it is more explicit, but the order it describes is Elyot's and Shakespeare's. His name for it is law, law in its general sense. Above all cosmic or earthly orders or laws there is Law in

general, "that Law which giveth life unto all the rest which are commendable just and good, namely the Law whereby the Eternal himself doth work." By a masterly ambiguity he avoids the great traditional dispute whether a thing is right because God wills it, or God wills it because it is right. God created his own law both because he willed it and because it was right. Though voluntary it was not arbitrary, but based on reason. That divine reason is beyond our understanding; yet we know it is there. God's law is eternal, "being that order which God before all ages hath set down with himself, for himself to do all things by." God chose to work in finitude in some sort to show his glory; and having so chosen he expressed the abundance of his glory in variety. The sense of full life given by Shakespeare's "degree" speech is a close poetical parallel to this theological doctrine of variety. From this single generating law of God Hooker goes on to describe the subordinate and separate laws; for law too must become multiple when it is applied to an abundantly diversified creation. God, as well as creating his own eternal law, issued his command in accordance with it:

> That part of it which ordereth natural agents we call usually nature's law; that which angels do clearly behold and without any swerving observe is a law celestial and heavenly; the law of reason, that which bindeth creatures reasonable in this world and with which by reason they may most plainly perceive themselves bound; that which bindeth them and is not known but by special revelation from God, divine law; human law, that which out of the law either of reason or of God men probably gathering to be expedient, they make it a law.

Hooker's first book comes to rest in a final summary, which includes the notion of law or order as harmony ("Take but degree away, untune that string, And hark what discord follows."):

> Wherefore that here we may briefly end: of law there can be no less acknowledged than that her seat is the bosom of God, her voice the harmony of the world: all things in heaven and earth do her homage, the very least as feeling her care and the greatest not exempted from her power; both angels and men and creatures of what condition soever, though each in different sort and manner yet all with uniform consent, admiring her as the mother of their peace and joy.

Though little enlarged on by the poets, cosmic order was yet one of the master-themes of Elizabethan poetry. It has its positive and its negative expressions. First there is an occasional full statement, as in Spenser's *Hymns.* Then there are the partial statements or the hints. Ulysses's "degree" speech is a partial statement. The long scene between Malcolm and Macduff at the English court and the reference to the healing power of the English king draw their strength from the idea. There is a short passage in the first part of *Henry VI* whose pivotal meaning any other than a contemporary reader might easily miss. It shows Talbot during a truce with the French doing homage to Henry VI, who has arrived at Paris to be crowned, and Henry rewarding him with the earldom of Shrewsbury. The scene is an example of the sort of thing that ought to happen in an orderly kingdom and it serves as a norm by which the many disorders in the same play are judged. Talbot's speech in its references

to the places of God, the king, and himself in their due degrees carries with it the whole context of Hooker and the great Homily of obedience:

> My gracious prince and honorable peers,
> Hearing of your arrival in this realm,
> I have awhile given truce unto my wars,
> To do my duty to my sovereign.
> In sign whereof this arm, that hath reclaim'd
> To your obedience fifty fortresses
> Twelve cities and seven walled towns of strength,
> Beside five hundred prisoners of esteem,
> Lets fall his sword before your highness' feet
> And with submissive loyalty of heart
> Ascribes the glory of his conquest got
> First to my God and next unto your grace.

The gorgeous emblematical figure of Ceremony coming to rebuke the lawless loves of Hero and Leander in Chapmans' continuation of Marlowe's poem is yet another, and far more explicit and academic, version:

> The goddess Ceremony, with a crown
> Of all the stars . . .
> Her flaming hair to her bright feet descended,
> By which hung all the bench of deities.
> And in a chain, compact of ears and eyes,
> She led Religion. All her body was
> Clear and transparent as the purest glass,
> For she was all presented to the sense.
> Devotion Order State and Reverence
> Her shadows were.