

How We Think or "The Great Chain of Being"

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We, as a group, portray a very small section of Elizabethan society. Within our numbers there are many classes and ranks which, in general, echo Elizabethan society as a whole. We have both servants and nobles with different stations and degrees in each category. Not every servant is a groom; not every noble is an earl.

We are trying to show the audience how Elizabethan society functions; how different ranks and stations interact with each other on a daily basis. Today we live in what is commonly called "a classless society". This is not quite true, but most people like to think of the United States in that way. Members of the DuPont, Trump, Rockefeller, Kennedy or Astor families do not, as a rule, mingle with or associate themselves with people from the ghetto, barrio, or hood. Children of these families don't, usually, attend the same schools as poor children, and there, generally, isn't much intermarriage. It is the same way with our mock nobility or famous personalities. Would you expect Elizabeth Taylor to stay at a Motel 6?; eat at a Denny's Restaurant?; fly coach on an airplane? No. A star's life is considered glamorous; something more than what the average Joe and his family have on a day-to-day basis. Class in the United States has to do with fame and fortune. Not so in Elizabethan England, where class was based on birth.

Our main goal as a group, as I understand it, is to show life in the court of Elizabeth I. To do that, we have to understand that in the Elizabethan culture class consciousness, station, place, and rank affected everything these people did or thought. It was such a basic or common knowledge that they didn't think about it at all. Scholars and theologians may have sat around and discussed The Great Chain of Being and how all men deserved certain rights but no-one else did. It just was. But times were starting to change and, eventually, a civil war would be needed to settle the problem. But that is in our future. Unless you are Dr. Dee and have a crystal ball you can't even imagine what the world would be like if class and rank didn't exist.

For us, as actors, to portray this society properly, we must understand The Great Chain of Being. To put it simply, the Elizabethans believed that there was and should be a place for everything and everything was and should be in its place. Even today, in these supposedly modern times, it feels good to belong, to find your niche, your place in life, your vocation, your calling. But finding your calling doesn't mean that it might not change. The same was true in Elizabethan times; you could be knighted or even ennobled. Look at the Earl of Leicester. He was ennobled. So was Burghley. It didn't happen very often, but it could and sometimes did happen.

In the Great Chain of Being, the Queen is the highest ranking or highest link in the chain here on Earth in England. She, in turn, is but a link in that portion of the Chain held by Princes of the Body. Above them comes the nine orders of angels and, finally, at the top of the chain, God. Below her are the Peers of the Realm, both Temporal and Spiritual. Then everyone else in pretty much the same order as we practice at rehearsals. That is what precedence is all about. Where you stand in relation to others on the Great Chain of Being.

Reputation is very important to the Elizabethans. A man's reputation is maintained by those who are in a relationship with him, be they higher or lower in station. An earl's servants take part of their rank from their master. If he is a drunkard and a lout the servants' reputation will fall because they let the master be seen that way in public. If the earl's servants are drunkards and louts it reflects on the master because he let them be seen that way in public. It is a vicious circle.

There is an interdependency among the links in the Chain. They are interacting all the time. For example; a nobleman takes care of his people (servants, tenants, etc.) because it not only is expected, though that is some of it, but is the right thing to do. Noblesse oblige. Nobility obliges. It doesn't mean that a noble is compelled to do something against his will, he does it because it is what he is supposed to do. It's an obligation. With rank comes responsibility. Those born to rank know this intrinsically. Those who are not born to that station have a harder time of it. For example, Sir Ralph Sadler, who was notoriously mean to his tenants, was a horrible rack-renter. Rack-renters raised the rents on property to the point that tenants paid most of what they earned on rent. Whereas older families would probably let the rents slide if the crops had failed, rack-renters would demand payment and, if the tenant was unable to pay, would put the tenants out.

One of the comforting things about the relationships between those in the Great Chain is the knowledge that you will be cared for when you can no longer care for yourself. This is especially true between masters and servants. When Aunt Polly can no longer clean a room because her back hurts too bad she may be set to do the mending. When her eyes can no longer thread the needle she may be given the task of looking after the household children and when she can no longer do that she'll just be allowed to sit in the sun and be taken care of. A noble's tenants can expect much the same treatment. That is why members of the old guard nobility distrust these new men. How can you trust someone who doesn't take care of their own when they are in need?

So, how do we show the audience class differences? Clothes are an obvious answer. But there are other ways also. Speech patterns. Even though BFA is probably very much like the speech of the nobility of the time it is not used by members of the Guild of St. George because it sounds common to the modern ear. Instead we use a modified BBC type of speech. The use of "thee and thou" also shows the difference in rank. Another method of showing rank is deference. The reverence and the removal of a man's cap are the primary methods of showing deference, but manners are also an example of deference. A man will stand when a woman walks into an area and offer her a chair. Friends reverence each other even if they are of equal rank. A gentleman will remove his cap while talking to someone of higher station.

This is just a short article on a subject that was very near and dear to the Elizabethans' hearts. If you would like some more information on The Great Chain of Being may I recommend *The Elizabethan World Picture* by E.M.W. Tillyard.