Elizabethan Era Chain of Being Theory

Chain of being is a theory or Elizabethan era in which the Elizabethans had belief. They believed that everything had its place in the chain of being, from god down to minerals. Thus, it can be defined down to a Christian concept which explains and give details about the strict religious hierarchical structure of all matter and life in Elizabethan era.

Composition of the chain of being starts from the very basic elements and goes up to the very highest, almighty God. There is a very crucial difference laid up in this concept. God and angels, both existing in spirit form sit at the top of the chain. Spirit is permanent and unchanging. On the other hand, Earthly matter is ever changing and mutable which are below the angels in this chain.

This difference in the chain of being has a moral associated with it. If one tries the spirit way, which was considered to be the noble one, then he becomes closer to the highest point of perfection, that is, God. On the contrary, the desire for flesh moves on away from God.

The chain of being is a religious one because the Elizabethans had placed their almighty God at its top. Moreover, it is very strict because it was impossible to change the position of an object in the hierarchy in it.

Earth or, rock formed the very basic and bottom of the chain. This element was considered at the bottom because it possessed only the quality of existence. Every element possesses the positive attributes of its predecessor and adds at least one more quality to it as the chain moves upward. Therefore, above the rocks are plants as they possess the quality of existence and life. Animals, which are above the plants as well, add motion and appetite in addition to life and existence.

Briefly; the chain of being starts from the highest point, the almighty God, progressing downwards to angels, demons (fallen angels), stars, moon, kings and queens, princes, noble, men, wild animals, domesticated animals, tress, other plants, precious stones, precious metals, other minerals, and finally, rock. This is the complete chain of being which was believed in the days of Elizabethan era.

Queen was at the top of the chain among human beings. Each component of the chain might be divided further into more sub components. For instance, among trees, useful tree such as oak was at the top and demonic tree such as yew tree was at the bottom. Among humans, the chain was as follows; queen - aristocrat lords - peasants.

Concluding the doctrine of chain of being in Elizabethan era, it is seen that everything imaginable fits in to somewhere or the other, and, thus, this division gives order and meaning to the universe.
The Divine Order

- The Great Chain of Being

In Elizabethan times, there was a different way of looking at life. People, including Shakespeare believed in a Divine Order, or Great Chain of Being. The Divine Order was the belief that everything in the universe has a specific place and rank in order of their perceived importance and "spiritual" nature. The more "spirit" a person or object had, the more power he or she had.

_The more spirit an object was thought to have, the higher they would be in the Divine Order. Here is the example of the Divine Order:_

**Most Amount of Spirit/Highest on the Divine Order**

- God
- Angels
  (seraphim, cherubim)
- Humans
  (kings, merchants, men women, etc.)
- Animals
  (mouse, dogs, lions, etc.)
- Plants
  (grass, trees, etc.)
- Nonliving Objects (rocks, metals, etc.)

**Least Amount of Spirit/ Lowest on the Divine Order**

Within each category there were more specific cataloguing. For example humans were believed to have different amounts of spirits. Below is an example of the Divine Order for humans:

**Most Amount of Spirit/Highest on the Divine Order**

- Kings
- Queens
- Nobles
- Merchants

**Note:**

The text above is a simplified version of the Divine Order. The full version includes more specific categories and distinctions, which are beyond the scope of this brief summary.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Least Amount of Spirit/ Lowest on the Divine Order</th>
<th>Peasants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

*Within families there was even specific cataloguing. Below is an example of the Divine Order for humans:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most Amount of Spirit/ Highest on the Divine Order</th>
<th>Father</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Daughter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Least Amount of Spirit/ Lowest on the Divine Order</th>
<th>Servants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

*What does all of this mean?*

The more "spirit" the person or object had, the more power it had in its interactions with people or things below in the order. People in Elizabethan England believed that God set up this order and wanted it to be followed. If someone or something were to break the Divine Order by not being obedient to whatever was above it, the person or thing that went against the God's will would be punished. Bigger betrayals of the Divine Order were believed to bring bigger punishments by God, while smaller betrayals would bring about smaller punishments. For example, if a noble overthrew a king, Elizabethan people thought that a natural disaster (an earthquake, a hurricane, etc.) would strike. If a daughter disobeyed her father, Elizabethan people believed the daughter might fall ill. This was a very convenient way for people higher in the Divine Order to maintain their power.

*What does this have to do with Shakespeare?*

Good question. Shakespeare sincerely believed in the Divine Order, and many of his plays revolve around this belief. Macbeth, Taming of the Shrew, Romeo and Juliet, and Hamlet are just a few of the plays that reflect Shakespeare's belief in the Great Chain of Being and his desire to maintain God's Order.