

FEMINIST READING OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S KING LEAR

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Abstract: *Feminism has always had its defenders and foes, especially in literature. For example, the study of the individual women characters in Shakespeare's King Lear has become an increasingly important part of the play's scholarship. For more than 30 years, other different interpretations of the play have been found. On one hand, it is asserted that this is a play about power, property and inheritance; or it is thought that King Lear shows us the dangers of not following the old ways of the patriarchal order. Therefore, while reading King Lear we may ask ourselves, for instance, if the female characters are stereotyped or if we have to ascertain Cordelia as the representative of goodness and her sisters as evil women. The main objective of the present paper is to answer similar questions and to try to highlight aspects referring to human nature when dealing with feelings.*

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Feminism comprises a number of movements, theories and philosophies that are concerned with issues of gender difference, that ask for equality for women, and that fight for women's rights and interests.

According to some, the history of feminism can be divided into three waves. The first wave was in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the second was in the 1960s and 1970s and the third extends from the 1990s to the present. Feminist Theory developed from the feminist movement. It takes a number of forms in a variety of disciplines such as feminist geography, feminist history and feminist literary criticism.

Feminism is concerned, to a large extent, with how women's lives have changed throughout history and feminist literary criticism studies literature by women for how it addresses or expresses the particularity of women's lives and experience. It also studies the male-dominated canon in order to understand how men have used their culture to continue their domination upon women.

According to feminist theory, the subordination of women originated in primitive societies in which women served as objects of exchange between father-dominated families that formed alliances through marriage. Though this kind of relationships seems to have been replaced in contemporary capitalist societies, the modern industrial world preserves its patriarchal character. Men hold almost all positions of political and economic power and unfortunately, economies work in such a way that women are more likely to be poor and men more likely to be rich. The assumed norm in many societies is for women to be in charge of domestic labor and childrearing while men engage in more public concerns. According to some feminists, such continued male domination is considered a consequence of male violence against women. Social structure translates a historically continuous threat of physical force and almost everything happens to be in favor of men. Why?

Because, according to cultural tradition, men are associated with reason, objectivity, logic, while women are linked to the body, matter, emotions, an absence of logic and reason. She is material, improper, indeterminate, incapable of conscious mastery, without self-identity, indifferent, formless and multiple.

Therefore, the feminine presence is remarkable in great works and plays written by great authors. One of them is *King Lear* by William Shakespeare.

Although Shakespeare reflects and at times supports the English Renaissance stereotypes of women and men and their various roles and responsibilities in society, he is also a writer who questions, challenges, and modifies those representations. His stories afford opportunities not only to understand Renaissance culture better but also to confront our own contemporary generalizations about gender, especially what it means to be female. In his own time, Shakespeare seems to have been raising questions about the standard images of males and females, about what the characteristics of each gender are, about what is defined as masculine and feminine, about how each gender possesses both masculine and feminine qualities and behaviors, about the nature and power of a hegemonic patriarchy, and about the roles women and men should play in acting out the stories of their lives.

King Lear is not only about a monarch and his divided realm, but also about a father, a property and his three daughters. Almost from the outset, act I, scene I, the play propels us into a complex of irrationalities. Having already divided up his kingdom and assigned the parts to their heirs (as we learn from the opening dialogue between Gloucester and Kent), Lear asks his daughters to engage in a contest, or better said, love-test, that will decide who shall get what. Gonerill and Regan play along, delivering long and exaggerated speeches, because, as they later reveal, they know Lear's capriciousness. Cordelia

knows too, yet she refuses the gambit. Her words are characterized by simplicity, plainness and even authentic feelings: "...love your majesty / According to my bond, nor more, nor less". Her negative intention to flatter her father can be interpreted as an opposition to his authority. Her responses are passive ones and in most of the cases she chooses silence, the only possible way of subversion for upper-class women of the Middle Ages. To Lear's question 'What can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sister?' she answers 'Nothing'. In the most literal sense, she understands the question perfectly and answers it correctly. Since the division has been made and her sisters have already received their shares, nothing she can say now can give her anything more than what is left. She can get less, in fact nothing, for nothing may come of 'nothing'; and it does.

However, the play depicts in the first place, the domination of women's lives for the sake of male vanity: "Better thou / Hadst not been born than not t'have pleased me better," Lear says to Cordelia in a line that is not meant to evoke sympathy from the audience. The incestuous character of his demands on his daughters is made evident when Cordelia points out that his desire for expressions of affection trespasses upon the rights of a husband.

It is well known that one can not approach feminism without referring to the problem of heterosexuality which appears in this situation: while it would seem to assure a man's identity as a masculine male, it leaves the man dependent on women for certification. Rather than be an identity, heterosexuality consists of a relation or an exchange, whereby male masculinity is confirmed by its other, the feminine – submissive and passive – woman. It is what it is not. Cordelia's 'nothing' in response to Lear's demands for tokens of affections exemplifies this dilemma. At the limit where the heterosexual male and the heterosexual female meet, there is always a margin of error where something needed can be lacking, where a required repetition that confirms by recognizing fails to occur. As the Fool reminds Lear several times, without heterosexual confirmation, Lear himself is nothing – "an O without a figure", which, given the slang meaning of nothing, he is a woman.

If women are the soft of the heterosexual regime, its point of proof as well as of vulnerability, it is because the exchange relationship that establishes that system is reversible. Lear's loss of sexual power is metaphorized as his feminization by his masculinized daughters. In a world shaped by compulsory heterosexuality and the cultural postulates of phallic normativity, the feminization of men results in a depletion of power and authority. If one cannot "command service"

both as domestic and as sexual labor, one shouldn't rule. In a world organized around aggressive relations between contending sites of power – a fact emphasized in the play through constant references to possible strife between such players as Albany and Cornwall – the need to survive dictates the subordination of weak characteristics and the privileging of strong ones. That these characteristics should be distributed along biological gender lines is not surprising for the historical moment. What is less clear is whether they are also distributed along the lines of gendered object choice. We say this because those left to rule at the end of the play – Kent and Edgar – are men who apparently love men not women.

The dangerous and destructive feminization of men occurs when women assume traditionally masculine powers, when they, as it were, become men. This places men like Lear, who are dependent on confirmation by feminine women of their masculine identity, in jeopardy. Their feminization produces a hysterical reaction that is figured in the play as madness. That Lear cannot ultimately survive the experience and must pass on power to Edgar suggests just how deadly feminization is conceived as being within the early seventeenth-century cultural gender codes.

Therefore, coming back to Cordelia's refusal, one realizes that this is thus a refusal to participate not only in a show trial but in the unreasonable behavior that Lear demands, insists upon. Although his daughter tied to him by bonds of filial devotion, she seems not to be the right partner for his foolishness. Or if she is, she knows it by also being insistent, demanding. Her logic nevertheless is undeniable: "Why have my sisters husbands, if they say / They love you all?" But Lear, in open court, is in no mood for truth or logic and Cordelia's irony stings. Despite his abdication, he means (again irrationally) to continue exercising control over the world as he knows it – that is the world as he has shaped it and intends to keep on shaping it. He has been told he is 'everything'; only later does he realize that he has been lied to, that he is not even 'argue-proof'. But by then the absurdities he has set in motion are moving to their inexorable conclusion: "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, / And thou no breath at all?"

Cordelia is not the only one who challenges Lear to desist from his reckless behavior. Kent also tries to get Lear to confront reality and reject the fantasy his irrationality creates – including the fantasy that by dividing up his kingdom he will prevent future strife. Forsaking polite courtier talk, he resorts to direct confrontation: "Be Kent unmannerly / When Lear is mad. What wouldst thou do, old man?" His monosyllables are emphatic. Earnestly, he asks Lear to check his

'hideous rashness', keep his kingdom intact and recognize what Lear himself well knows – that his youngest daughter does not love him least.

As known by everyone, women were perceived as obedient and submissive in the past. These characteristic traits were portrayed as favorable and if women lacked these aspects they were considered as non-existent. Therefore, one should notice that Cordelia appears only at the beginning and at the end of the play, being absent for the rest of the play. This might be considered as a clear example of the prototypical "Shakespearean woman": absent, silent or dead. Cordelia is characterized by her silent and obedient attitude; her sisters, on the other hand, have a full power of speech and they are trying to define male authority. Gonerill seems false in the love test and she also comments on the fact that she and Regan will no longer be ruled by their father. They are now those in power, not Lear. However, the clash between Lear and his daughters will take place in the scene IV of the first act. Gonerill and Regan utilize deception to gain priority and they strive to completely dethrone their father. Gonerill begins attacking Lear's soldiers of behaving badly and she will accuse Lear of promoting his soldiers quarrelsome behaviour. Lear's Fool will be the reporter to the audience of Lear's being treated badly by his daughters.

Lear is so puzzled by the events taking place that he will even ask Gonerill: "Are you our daughter?" Whereas Lear gets confused the Fool goes on with his talk: "May not an ass know when the cart draws the Horse? - Whoop, Jug! I love thee." Lear's extreme degree of puzzlement will even get to a kind of amnesiac state in which he asks who he really is: "Doth any here know me? - Why, this is not Lear: Doth Lear walk thus? Speak thus? Where are his eyes?" At the end of the argument Lear feels so enraged, astonished and depressed, that he announces his going to Regan: "Degenerate bastard! I'll not trouble thee / Yet have I left a daughter."

However, Regan is one on the same terms than Gonerill, who before Lear's arrival at Regan's castle, sends her a letter telling her all. So, Regan tells Lear: "O, Sir, you are old; / Nature in you stands on the very verge / Of her confine: you should be ruled, and bed / By some discretion that discerns your State / Better than yourself. Therefore, I pray you, / That to our sister you do make return; / Say you have wrong'd her, sir. Lear is puzzled, Regan has not acted as he expected. She even wants him to return to Gonerill and ask her forgiveness. He has lost his power, he has not longer a kingdom and his daughters make a fool of him. He has no power of decision. However, Lear will try to soften her by

flattering her, putting her in a higher scale than Gonerill.

Thus, according to Shakespeare's text, Gonerill and Regan are clearly represented as demons, monsters, anything but human. They are responsible for the chaos going on and of the disruption of the state. They are the enemies of the mankind and must be destroyed. Women at power can only bring disgrace, however a saviour will come. And that saviour will be a "sanctified woman": Cordelia, who seems to be a redeeming woman, though for some critics, this is a restoration of patriarchy, but Cordelia seems to work as redemption of the feminine, she is a balance between her sisters.

However, the reader notices that these sisters will end tragically. Their lust for Edmund will destroy them. Thus, Cordelia's return brings changes: evil is destroyed, but unfortunately, she will not find a better end.

Gonerill poisons Regan and then stabs herself. Cordelia, on the other hand, is imprisoned together with her father by Edmund. Cordelia's only care is her father, and her father's only care is his beloved daughter. This is clearly appreciated when Edmund imprisons them, and Lear is horrified when Cordelia asks if they will see her sisters. Cordelia will later be strangled to death in the jail, and from that shock Lear will die later.

According to some critics, women are seen as a positive force, thus Lear is redeemed by means of a loving non-patriarchal relationship with Cordelia. But, however, this is thought only as a restoration of patriarchy.

Act two can also be perceived as anti-feminist. Luce Irigaray states "Man and woman, woman and man are therefore always meeting as though for the first time since they cannot stand in for one another. I shall never take the place of a man, never will a man take mine". The sisters, in a discrete fashion, strived to become the opposite sex. They could have gained power and rights to the country with out striving to deliberately belittle their father. This notion is also perceived through their relationship with their husbands. It seems as if they dominated that relationship as well. They refuse to listen to their spouses when they ask them to treat their father in a more kindly fashion. However, in order to gain power, according to Irigaray, once must remain in their own position and never strive to become the opposite sex.

Explorations of gender identity, the role of women in a father-dominated family, and male-female bonding mark other arenas of emphasis for contemporary critics of *King Lear*. A study by Coppélia Kahn (1986) focuses on the absence of a maternal figure in the drama. Assessing the play from a feminist and historicist point of view, Kahn

contended that part of the reason for Lear's failure is that he fights against his own repressed need for a mother figure; according to Kahn, Lear begins to recognize and accept his own vulnerability, dependency, and capacity for love only as his life nears its end. Taking as his subject bonding between men within the play, Peter Erickson (1985) concluded that although Lear tries to counter the loss of his daughters with the fellowship and nurturance of other male characters, these male bonds are "finally a minor resource compared with the unequivocal centrality of Cordelia for Lear." Lear's relationship with his daughters, particularly in light of the patriarchal structure under which they live, has also continued to intrigue modern critics. Analyzing the principle of mutuality (or reciprocity) in the play, Marianne Novy (1984) suggested that *King Lear* criticizes the powerful rights fathers held over their daughters. As Novy pointed out, Lear abuses his authority over Cordelia, then needs her forgiveness. The balance of the patriarchal structure is subsequently threatened, as the traditional ruler/subject relationship is upset.

The study of the individual women characters in *King Lear* has become an increasingly important part of the play's scholarship. Considering the moral development of Cordelia, Roy W. Battenhouse (1965) described how her experiences with love inspire her to adopt a more altruistic outlook and cast off her former preoccupation with the self. John Bayley (1981) compared Shakespeare's Cordelia with other versions of her character, including her portrayals in the historical Leir story of 1605 and in Nahum Tate's 1681 version. Finding Shakespeare's Cordelia devoid of a past and existing in a "simple reality," Bayley showed how this depiction contributes to the playwright's emphasis on the matter at hand in the play, rather than on the

individual stories of the characters. Expounding upon the natures of Goneril and Regan, William R. Elton (1966) found them to be typical of Renaissance pagans, since they possess an intense preoccupation with the natural and with the self. Elton also proposed that the two sisters were modeled after the Machiavellian villain. Several other contemporary critics have commented on Goneril's and Regan's sensuality as well as their cruelty, and at least one commentator has proposed that they prefigure some of the characteristics of the writings of the Marquis de Sade.

Some of the most suggestive criticism of the play has sought to explore and decipher the meaning behind its references to sexuality. Noting the "unpleasant" manner in which Shakespeare refers to women and sexuality throughout the play, several critics have found the playwright's inclusion of sexuality superfluous, and have speculated that Shakespeare's own repulsion toward sex influenced him significantly during the composition of the drama. Other scholars, however, have found the theme of sex wholly necessary to the tragedy. Focusing on Lear's increasing self-discovery during the play, Paul A. Jorgensen (1967) alleged that the king achieves a greater understanding of human nature through his anatomization of the female body. Studying the negative attitudes displayed toward sexuality in *King Lear*, Robert H. West (1960) observed that the play exalts, rather than indicts, sexuality and love, creating an impression of awe and mystique essential to tragedy.

A feminist might interpret Lear as an abusive patriarch rather than as a tragic hero. According to Kahn, Lear goes mad because he is unable to accept his dependence on the feminine, his daughters. Therefore, the play is somehow considered to be one about "male anxiety".

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