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WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDY 'KING LEAR' AND FEMINIST CRITICISM

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Abstract

Tragedy assumes the existence of 'a permanent, universal and essentially unchanging human nature' but the human nature implied in the moral and aesthetic satisfaction of tragedy is most often explicitly male. In King Lear for example, the narrative and its dramatisation present a connection between sexual insubordination and anarchy, and the connection is given an explicitly misogynist emphasis. A feminist reading of the text cannot simply assert the countervailing rights of Goneril and Regan, for to do so would imply reverse the emotional structures of the play, associating feminist ideology with atavistic selfishness and the monstrous assertion of individual wills. Feminism cannot simply take 'the woman's part' when that part has been so morally loaded and theatrically circumscribed. Not is any purpose served by merely denouncing the text's misogyny, for King Lear's position at the centre of the Shakespeare canon is assured by as continual reproduction in education and the theatre and is unlikely to be shifted by feminist sabre-rattling.

Keywords

Misogynist, propinquity, heterosexual, feminist ideology, gerontocratic ideal.

Introduction

A Shakespearean tragedy, according to A.C. Bradley, may be called "a story of exceptional calamity leading to death of a man in high estate. But the calamities of the

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tragedy do not simply happen, not are they sent. The proceed mainly from the actions of men. These actions beget further actions. These inter-connected deeds lead in an inevitable sequence of suffering and tragedy. The effect of these actions on the spectators is two-fold. They regard the suffering as something which happens to the characters and as also caused by them. The principal characters, especially the hero, contribute in some degree to the catastrophe the hero dies. In a Shakespearean tragedy, the centre of the tragedy may be said "to lie in action issuing from character, or in character issuing in action". We get the impression that the tragedy follows from the deeds of men, and that the main source of these deeds is the character. Since the hero holds a high position, his downfall and death arouse feelings of pity and fear in the spectators. .

The action of the play, the organisation of its points of view and the theatrical dynamic of its central scenes all depend upon an audience accepting an equation between 'human nature' and male power. In order to experience the proper pleasures of pity and fear, they must accept that fathers are owed particular duties by their daughters and be appalled by the chaos which ensues when those primal links are broken. Such a point of view is not a matter of consciously-held opinion but it is a position required and determined by the text in order for it to make sense. It is also the product of a set of meanings produced in a specific way by the Shakespearean text and is different from that produced in other versions of the story.

The representation of patriarchal misogyny is most obvious in the treatment of Goneril and Regan. In the chronicle play King Lear, the sisters' villainy is much more evidently a function of the plot. Their mocking pleasure at Cordella's downfall takes the form of a comic double act and Regan's evil provides the narrative with the exciting twist of an attempt on Lear's life. In the

Shakespearean text by contrast, the narrative, language and dramatic organisation all define the sisters' resistance to their father in terms of their gender, sexuality and position within the family. Family relations in this play are seen as fixed and determined, and any movement within them is portrayed as a destructive reversal of rightful order (see I.iv). Goneril's and Regan's treatment of their father merely reverses existing patterns of rule and is seen not simply as cruel and selfish but as a fundamental violation of human nature – as is made powerfully explicit in the speeches which condemn them (III.vii. 101-3; IV.ii. 32-50). Moreover when Lear in his madness fantasises about the collapse of law and the destruction of ordered social control, women's lust is vividly represented as the centre and source of the ensuing corruption. (Iv.vi. 110-28). The generalised character of Lear's and Albany's vision of chaos, and the poetic force with which it is expressed, creates the appearance of truthful universality which is an important part of the play's claim to greatness. However, that generalised vision of chaos is present in gendered terms in which patriarchy, the institution of male power in the family and the State, is seen as the only form of social organisation strong enough to hold chaos at bay.

The close links between misogyny and patriarchy define the women in the play more precisely. Goneril and Regan are not presented as archetypes of womanhood for the presence of Cordelia 'redeems nature from the general curse' (IV.vi.209). However, Cordelia's saving love, so much admired by critics, works in the action less as a redemption for womankind than as an example of patriarchy restored. Hers, of course, is the first revolt against Lear's organising authority. The abruptness of her refusal to play her role in Lear's public drama dramatises the outrage of her denial of conformity and the fury of Lear's ensuring appeal to archetypal forces shows that a rupture of 'Propinquity and property of blood' is tantamount to the destruction of nature itself. Cordelia, however, is

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the central focus of emotion in the scene. Her resistance to her father gains audience assent through her two asides during her sisters' performances, moreover the limits of that resistance are clearly indicated. Her first defence is not a statement on her personal autonomy or the rights of her individual will; it is her right to retain a part of her love for 'that lord whose hand must take my plight'. Lear's rage thus seems unreasonable in that he recognises only his rights as a father; for the patriarchal family to continue, it must also recognise the rights of future fathers and accept the transfer of women from fathers to husbands. By the end of the scene, Cordelia is reabsorbed into the patriarchal family by marriage to which her resistance to Lear presents no barrier. As she reassures the king of France :

> It is no vicious blot, murder or foulness,
> No unchaste action or dishonoured step
> That hath deprived me of your grace and favour.
>
> (I.i.228-31)

Her right to be included in the ordered world of heterosexual relations depends upon her innocence of the ultimate human violation of murder which is paralleled with the ultimate sexual violation of unchastity.

However, any dispassionate analysis of the mystification of real socio-sexual relations in King Lear is the antithesis of our response to the tragedy in the theatre where the tragic power of the play endorses its ideological position at every stage. One of the most important and effective shifts in the action is the transfer of our sympathy back to Lear in the middle of the action. The long sequence of Act II, scene iv dramatises the process of Lear's decline from the angry autocrat of Act I to the appealing figure of pathetic insanity. The psychological realism of the dramatic writing and the manipulation of the point of view forge the bonds between Lear as a complex character and the sympathies of the audience.

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The audience's sympathies are engaged by Lear's fury at the insult offered by Kent's imprisonment and the by the pathos of Lear's belated attempt at self-control (II.iv. 101-4(. His view of the action is further emotionally secured by his sarcastic enactment of the humility which his daughters recommend.

Do you but mark how this becomes the house:

Dear daughter, I confess that I am old.

Age is unnecessary. On my knees I beg

That you'll vouch safe me raiment, bed and fond.

(II.iv. 53-6)

As Regan says, these are unsightly tricks. Their effect is to close off the dramatic scene by offering the only alternative to Lear's behaviour as we see it. The dramatic fact becomes the only fact and the audience is thus positioned to accept the tragic as inevitable, endorsing the terms of Lear's great poetic appeal:

O reason not the need! Our basest beggars

Are in the poorest things superfluous.

Allow not nature more than nature needs,

Man's life is cheap as beast's.

(II.iv.263-6)

The ideological power of Lear's speech lies in his invocation of nature to support his demands on his daughters; its dramatic power lies in its movement from argument to desperate assertion of his crumbling humanity as the abyss of madness approaches. However, once again, that humanity is seen in gendered terms as Lear appeals to the gods to

touch me with noble anger,

And let not women's weapons, water drops

Stain my man's cheeks.

(II.iv.275-7)

The theatrical devices which secure Lear as the centre of the audience's emotional attention operate even more powerfully in the play's denouement. The figure of

Cordelia is used as a channel for the response to her suffering father. Her part in establishing the terms of the conflict is over by Act I; when she reappears it is as an emblem of dutiful pity. Before she appears on stage, she is described by a 'gentleman' whose speech reconstructs her as a static, almost inanimate daughter of sorrows. The poetic paradoxes of his speech construct Cordelia as one who resolves contradiction, which is her potential role in the narrative and her crucial function in the ideological coherence of the text:

patience and sorrow strove

Who should express her goodliest. You have seen

Sunshine and rain at once: her smiles and tears

Were like a better way: those happy smilets

That played on her ripe lip seemed not to know

What guests were in her eyes, which parted thence

As pearls from diamonds dropped.

(IV.iii.15-23)

With Cordelia's reaction pre-empted by the gentleman, the scene where Lear and Cordelia meet substitutes the pleasure of pathos for suspense. The imagery gives Cordelia's forgiveness divine sanction, and the realism of Lear's struggle for sanity closes off any responses other than complete engagement with the characters' emotions. Yet in this encounter Cordelia denies the dynamic of the whole play. Lear fears that she cannot love him:

For your sisters

Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.

You have some cause, they have not.

(IV.vii.73-5)

But Cordelia demurs with 'No cause, no cause'.

Shakespeare's treatment of this moment contrasts with that of the earLear chronicle play from which he took a number of details, including Lear kneeling and being raised. In the old play the scene is almost comic as Lear and Cordella kneel and rise in

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counterpoint to their arguments about who most deserves blame. The encounter is used to sum up the issues and the old play allows Cordella a much more active role in weighing her debt to Lear. In Shakespeare's text, however, the spectacle of suffering obliterates the past action so that the audience with Cordelia will murmur 'No cause, no cause'. Rather than a resolution of the action, their reunion becomes an emblem of possible harmony, briefly glimpsed before the tragic debacle.

The deaths of Lear and Cordelia seem the more shocking for this moment of harmony but their tragic impact is also a function of thwarting the narrative expectation of harmony restored which is established by the text's folk-tale structure. The folk-tale of the love test provides an underlying pattern in which harmony is broken by the honest daughter and restored by her display of forgiveness. The organisation of the Shakespearean text intensifies and then denies those expectations so as once more to insist on the connection between evil women and a chaotic world.

The penultimate scene opposes the ordered formality of the resolution of the Gloucester plot with the unseemly disorder of the women's involvement. The twice-repeated trumpet call, the arrival of a mysterious challenger in disguise, evoke the order of a chivalric age when conflict was resolved by men at arms. The women, however, act as disrupters of that order: Goneril attempts to deny the outcome of the tourney, grappling in an unseemly quarrel with Albany (V.iii.156-8) and their ugly deaths interrupt Edgar's efforts to close off the narrative with a formal account of his part in the story and Gloucester's death.

Thus the deaths of Lear and Cordelia are constrasted with and seem almost a result of the destructiveness of the wicked sisters. Albany says of them: 'This judgement of the heavens, that makes us tremble, /Touches us not with pity' (V.iii.233-4). The tragic victims, however, affect us quite differently.

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When Lear enters, bearing his dead daughter in his arms, we are presented with a contrasting emblem of the natural, animal assertion of family love, destroyed by the anarchic forces of lust and the 'indistinguished space of woman's will'. At this point in the play the most stony-hearted feminist could not withhold her pity even though it is called forth at the expense of her resistance to the patriarchal relations which it endorses.

Discussing the 'gerontocratic ideal', for example, Keith Thomas has noted that 'The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are conspicuous for a sustained desire to subordinate persons in their teens and twenties and to delay their equal participation in the adult world…. Such devices were also a response to the mounting burden of population on an unflexible economy'. This gerontocratic ideal was not without contradiction, for the very elderly were removed from economic and political power and 'essentially it was men in their forties or fifties who ruled'. Moreover the existence of this ideal did not obviate the need for careful material provision for the elderly. There is a certain poignancy in the details of wills which specify the exact houseroom and the degree of access to the household fire which is to be left to aged parents. However, this suggests that Lear's and his daughter's bargaining over the number of his knights need not be seen as an egregious insult and that the generational conflict within the nuclear family could not be resolved by recourse to a simply accepted ideal of filial piety.

As a corrective to prevailing gloomy assessments of the happiness of the early modern family, Keith Wrightson has produced evidence of individuals who show considerable concern to deal with family conflict in a humane and flexible fashion. But it is equally clear from his evidence that family relations were the focus of a great deal of emotional energy and the primary source both of pleasure and pain. This is also borne out in Michael

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MacDonald's account of a seventeenth-century psychiatric practice in which, as today, women were more susceptible to mental illness than men:

Not all the stress women suffered was caused by physical illness….

> Women were also more vulnerable than men to psychologically disturbing social situation. Their individual propensities to anxiety and sadness were enhanced by patriarchal custom and values that limited their ability to remedy disturbing situations… Napier and his troubled patients also believed that oppression made people miserable and even mad, but the bondage they found most troubling subordinated daughters to parents, wives to husbands rather than peasants to lords.

This discussion of social history cannot propose an alternative 'interpretation' of the text or assert its true meaning in the light of historical 'facts'. Rather it indicates that the text was produced within the contradictions of contemporary ideology and practice and suggests that similar contradictions exist within the play. These contradictions could fruitfully be brought to bear in modern criticism and productions. The dispute between Lear and his daughters is in part concerned with love and filial gratitude but it also dramatises the tense relationship between those bonds and the material circumstances in which they function. Lear's decision to publish his daughter's dowries is so 'that future strife / May be prevented now' : the connection between loving harmony and economic justice is the accepted factor which underlies the formal patterning of the opening scene and is disrupted only by Cordelia's asides which introduce a

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notion of love as a more individual and abstract concept, incompatible both with public declaration and with computation of forests, champains, rivers and meads. Cordelia's notion of love gained precedence in modern ideology but it seriously disrupts Lear's discussion of property and inheritance. When Lear responds with 'Nothing will come of nothing his words need not be delivered as an angry calling to account: they could equally be presented as a puzzled reaction to an inappropriate idea. Moreover Cordelia is not opposing hereditary duty to transcendent love – she does not reply "There's beggary in the love that can be reckoned'. When she expends on her first assertion her legal language suggests a preference for a limited, contractual relationship: 'I love your majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less' (I.i.94-5). The conflict between the contractual model and the patriarchal model of subjects' obligations to their king was at issue in contemporary political theory and Cordelia's word here introduce a similar conflict into the question of obligations within the family.

When in Act II Lear again bargains with his daughters, a similar confusion between affective relations and contractual obligations is in play. Lear asserts the importance of the contractual agreement made with his daughters, for it is his only remaining source of power, Since they are now in control, Goneril and Regan can assert an apparently benign notion of service which does not depend on contract or mathematical computation:

What need you five and twenty? Ten? Or five?

To follow in a house where twice so many

Have a command to tend you?

(II.iv.259-62)

The emotional impact of the scene, which is its principal power in modern productions, simply confuses the complex relations between personal autonomy, property and power which are acted out in this confrontation. The scene could be directed to

indicate that the daughters' power over Lear is the obverse of his former power over them. His power over them is socially sanctioned but its arbitrary and tyrannical character is clear from his treatment of Cordelia. Lear kneeling to beg an insincere forgiveness of Regan is no more nor less 'unsightly' than Goneril's and Regan's formal protestations to their father. Both are the result of a family organisation which denies economic autonomy in the name of transcendent values of love and filial piety and which affords no rights to the powerless within it. Such a production of meaning offers the pleasure of understanding kin place of the pleasure of emotional identification. In this context Lear's speeches about nature and culture are part of an argument, not a cri de Coeur; the blustering of his threats is no longer evidence of the destruction of a man's self-esteem but the futile anger of a powerful man deprived of male power.

Further potential for comically undermining the focus on Lear is provided by the Fool, who disrupts the narrative movement of the action, subverting if not denying the emotional impact of the scenes in which he appears. In an important sense the Fool is less an alter ego for Lear than for his daughters: like them he reminds Lear and the audience of the material basis for the change in the balance of power. However, where they exploit Lear's powerlessness with cruelty and oppression he denies that necessity by his continued allegiance. In modern productions this important channel for an alternative view of events is closed off by holding the Fool within the narrative, using him as a means to heighten the emotional appeal of Lear's decline.

The potential for subversive contradiction in the text is, however, restricted to the first part. Lear's madness and the extrusion of Gloucester's eyes heavily weight the action towards a simpler notion of a time when humanity must perforce prey upon itself like monsters of the deep, denying comic recognition of

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the material facts of existence. Yet even Cordelia's self-denying love or Gloucester's stoic resignation are denied the status of ideological absolutes. The grotesque comic lie of Gloucester's fall from Dover cliff is hardly a firm basis for a belief in the saving power of divine providence and Cordelia's acceptance of her father's claim on her is futile because it is unsupported by material power.

A production of the text which would restore the element of dialectic, removing the privilege both from the character of Lear and from the ideological positions which he dramatises, is crucial to a feminist critique. Feminist criticism need not restrict itself to privileging the woman's part or to special pleading on behalf of female characters. It can be equally well served by making a text reveal the conditions in which a particular ideology of femininity functions and by both revealing and subverting the hold which such an ideology has for readers both female and male.

The misogyny of King Lear, both the play and its hero, is constructed out of an ascetic tradition which presents women as the source of the primal sin of lust, combining with concerns about the threat to the family posed by female insubordination. However the text also dramatises the material conditions which lie behind assertions of power within the family, even as it expresses deep anxieties about the chaos which can ensue when that balance of power is altered.

An important part of the feminist project is to insist that the alternative to the patriarchal family and heterosexual love is not chaos but the possibility of new forms of social organisation and affective relationships. However, feminists also recognise that our socialisation within the family and, perhaps more importantly, our psychological development as gendered subjects make these changes no simple matter. They involve deconstructing the sustaining comforts of love and the family as the only haven in the

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heartless world. Similarly a feminist critique of the dominant traditions in literature must recognise the source sof its power, not only in the institutions which reproduce them but also in the pleasures which they afford. But feminist criticism must also assert the power of resistance, sub-verting rather than co-opting the domination of the patriarchal Bard.

Conclusion

A more fruitful point of entry for feminism is in the process of the text's reproduction. As Elizabeth Cowie and others have pointed out, sexist meanings are not fixed but depend upon constant reproduction by their audience. In the case of King Lear the text is tied to misogynist meaning only if it is reconstructed with its emotional power and its moral imperatives intact. Yet the text contains possibilities for subverting these meanings and the potential for reconstructing them in feminist terms.

The first of these lies in the text's historical otherness; for in spite of constant critical assertion of its transcendent universality, specific connections can be shown between Shakespeare's text and contemporary material and ideological conflict without presenting a merely reductive account of artistic production in terms of material circumstances.

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