

Shakespeare's King Lear and Feminist Theory — Patriarchal and Feminine Love Confronted in Shakespearian Tragedy

© Emanuela Puosi

Shakespeare's tragedy King Lear is often criticized by Feminists for its supposed misogyny. But opposing patriarchal and feminine notions of love reveals another reading.

Too often, and perhaps too readily, Shakespeare has been interpreted by much feminist criticism on the basis of the predominance of male characters and violence in his work.

In order to get rid of this apparent misogyny it is necessary to put Shakespeare's plays into their proper historical context (McKluskie, p. 40). Instead, much criticism attaches to his work a value of universality assuming that what is portrayed in the plays and the conditions under which they were written has not changed in time.

But by reframing the plays within their proper historical context, the patriarchal values allegedly advocated by them necessarily become unimportant because confined to a system of reference bygone and rejected.

Opposed Morals

King Lear is one of the plays that have been read as a misogynist work. The characterization of the female figures in the play, which is tendentially negative, seems to prove this point. The two older sisters are evil, plotting at the expense of their father, and Cordelia is weak.

But by confronting the two systems of morals present in the tragedy, another reading is possible. The characters' beliefs are governed by different principles. Lear and his older daughters can be said to endorse a typically masculine or patriarchal moral, which sees filial love as a duty thus relating the realm of feeling to that of power (through the distribution of riches).

Cordelia, on the other hand, lives her life according to a more feminine morality that takes love to be independent of power and indeed generally separates the sphere of politics from the personal one of feelings.

Two Systems of Reference

Cordelia's values are incompatible with those of her father and sisters and this inevitably causes a breakdown in communication. She applies a different system of values to reality and consequently gives different meanings to things and feelings. She has priorities other than power. This is why she cannot get through to them and is sent away.

Once Lear understands the deceit of his older daughters, he also becomes aware of the fallacy of the patriarchal logic he has judged the world by until now. Significantly, he can only understand Cordelia once he has lost his power and is left, "contending with the fretful elements" (Shakespeare, p. 78), at the mercy of Nature, the ultimate Feminine power.

Lear then comes to adopt Cordelia's structure and her values. Femininity then prevails on the moral ground. Even the deaths of Cordelia and Lear are no threat to this interpretation. On the contrary, the deaths of the two central characters show the values initially endorsed by Lear to be noxious. Thus patriarchal morality is put into question and denounced for its short-sightedness.