

Resurrecting Lear — Opposing feminist criticisms of Shakespeare's greatest work

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The recent politically sparked era of contemporary criticism which emerged in the 1980's, spawned in diametric opposition to established Christian, current conservative humanist and existentialist interpretations of King Lear, has aided in the equipping of readers and theatre goers with a contemporary perspective with which to view what is regarded as the apex of English canonized literature. It is precisely due to the over canonization and paramount standard of aestheticism attributed to King Lear which makes this work the ultimate domain for modern critics to rescue Shakespeare from conservative appropriation by offering their own textually enlivening analyses.

Two recent feminist critics Kathleen Mcluskie and Coppélia Kahn both use the King Lear forum to articulate anti-polar interpretations of the play. This balanced rift amongst the modern feminist camp, united in promoting the ideas and aims of modern feminists, illustrates the divided positions currently occupied concerning the central issue of the extent to which, the play may be seen as sustaining or sabotaging oppressive structures of power in both Shakespeare's time as well as our own (Ryan 1993, p.3).

Mcluskie's purported view in 'The Patriarchal bard: Feminist criticism and King Lear' advocates the belief that Shakespeare and King Lear are both agents of conservative oppression seeking to perpetuate a governing ethos of male dominion disguised as human nature. For Mcluskie, the theatrical dynamic of central scenes being communicated in the tragic manner of their fashioning chiefly depends on the audience's acceptance that 'human nature' is equated to male power (Mcluskie 1993, p.48). Without such a textually reinforced and required acceptance, the tumultuous events of the play can not be experienced in their entire canon forming splendour. For how are we to truly comprehend the degree of suffering inflicted upon Lear until we realise it is due to the female perpetrated corruption of a male centric human nature.

Shakespeare's King Lear further promotes a misogynist power pattern of oppression via the gendered terms of filial resistance explicated through linguistic, narrative and dramatic organisation. In the patriarchal world created for Lear, the gender positioning of family members and rulers is the product of fixed government, implemented as a means of bedlam circumvention. Accordingly, it is of no surprise that tragedy of the most despairing breed strikes out with perilous fervour against all those involved in the male divestiture of authority. Goneril's and Regan's treatment of their father is not seen simply as cruel and selfish but as a fundamental violation of human nature – as is made dramatically explicit in the speeches which condemn them (111. vii. 101-3; IV.ii. 32-50) (Mcluskie 1993, p.49).

An important part of King Lear's canonical status is the poetic force with which apparent universal truths are articulated. When Lear gripped by madness rants about the collapse of ordered social control and the destruction of the law, it is the female desire which is the source of ensuing ruin (IV.vi.110-28). Mcluskie argues that this broad vision of chaos is present in gendered terms in which patriarchy and institutionalised familial and state power is the only social organisation strong enough to keep the female "lust-excited" chaos at bay (Mcluskie 1993, p.49). It is via this interpretation of King Lear that Mcluskie seeks to generate a resistance of meaning to the misogynist views of Shakespeare's wizardry. Without such objections it is not hard to imagine our greatest literary treasure perpetually dangling from the noose of aesthetic grandeur supported by a beam of patriarchal oppression.

In contrast to Mcluskie's assertions those made by Coppélia Kahn interpret King Lear not as a vehicle for endlessly transporting patriarchal dominion but rather as a dramatically framed manifestation of criticism flung in the face of such a patriarchal society. In 'The absent mother in King Lear', Kahn uses the tools of psychoanalytic theory and historical contextualisation to excavate a tragedy of masculinity which far from expresses male supremacy by depicting 'the failure of a father's power to command love in a patriarchal world' (Kahn 1993 p.95). This modern feminist interpretation finds an ally in King Lear via the play's functioning as a parading ground of suffering used to illustrate the perils lurking amidst an explicitly male natured society.

Shakespeare's version of King Lear was first performed in an era where two forces, one political and one religious, united in order to elevate the degree of paternal power in the family. The play reflects and questions this urging by removing any trace of a literal mother, eliciting that it is fathers alone who are involved in the procreation of families. There is no mother role in which a harmonious existence may ensue; instead there is only a male generated source of prerogative, authority, love and power. It is this depiction of a patriarchal dominance, coupled with an absolute void of maternal input, which inevitably exposes the families of Lear and Gloucester to tragic circumstances of demonic proportion.

When Lear is witnessed parcelling out his kingdom we see him asking of his daughters two mutually exclusive things at once: he wishes to have complete control over those he also desires to be completely dependant upon (Kahn 1993 p.99). After abiding by the patriarchal rules of female suppression his entire reign, he now wishes to regress back to the maternal sensibilities he has long avoided. This striving for a mutually exclusive package of interaction fits securely within the psychoanalytic framework of the pre-oedipal child. Here the child perceives of themselves and the mother existing as an undifferentiated dual unity. Her breasts and love are a nurturing extension of the child, available for summoning on demand. When Lear in search of such a relationship with his daughters is denied by them all this strand of nursery, he is cast into the flames of madness and kept in check by his own male-anxiety. Presented in this sphere, King Lear may plausibly be received as a mouthpiece for moral instruction, warning those subjected to its exposure of the hazards that repressing the vulnerability, dependency and capacity for feelings called "feminine", may yield (Kahn 1993 p. 95).

Despite the opposing nature of their exhibited traits, both Mcluskie's and Kahn's interpretations are closely related via the functioning genealogy of modern criticism. Both literary commentators are adamant about challenging the established framework of conventional criticism not only in an attempt to liberate Shakespeare from conservative clutches but also as a means of promoting current political issues. Without such modern, ideologically charged methods of critical analysis, literary icons such as King Lear might have been perpetually stuffed inside a drawer marked "specialised study" and denied the chance to be read as part of a social text promoting "a range of perspectives committed to re-reading the play in the light of innovative work on gender, race, power, language and the function of criticism itself" (Ryan 1993 p. 3).

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