

Sample Essay II

Feminist Theory & *King Lear*

Cordially Cordelia

When going to war, France is probably not on the forefront of anyone's mind as a great ally to a battling nation. With their seasoned resume chock full of ties and losses in the major battles throughout history, France resembles a young schoolgirl trying to play ball with the guys; unless she sleeps with the captain, she will undoubtedly be picked last. It is interesting to note then that France anticipated the Feminist movement in combat and warfare over 500 years ago with Joan of Arc in the Hundred Years' War. "Born in eastern France, she led the French army to many important victories during the Hundred Years' War, claiming divine and worldly guidance, and was indirectly responsible for the coronation of Charles VII," (Wikipedia) which eventually led to the end of the war. Twenty years after her death for heresy, being burned at the stake by the English, Joan of Arc was declared a martyr. In 1909, she was canonized, which was rare for women at the time, and this impelled major writers to include her in their work. Shakespeare incorporated her into his play *Henry VI, Part I* in 1590. Approximately fifteen years later, Shakespeare introduced a similar figure in his play *King Lear*: the cordial and sympathetic Cordelia.

In Act 4, Scene 3 of *King Lear*, on the eve of attacking the British forces to restore the proper and dignified Crown to England, the yellow-bellied King of France runs back to the Château de Versailles "suddenly" and with "no reason" (4.3.1-2). Perhaps spotting the almighty naval forces of England in the distance made him ill. Or maybe he knew of France's poor track record in winning wars. It does not matter considering this scene is not

about a king, just like the story of *King Lear* is not about a king. It is a story about what was left behind by the kings. It is a story about Cordelia. First her father, King Lear, leaves her by disinheriting and banishing her from England. In the interview between Feminist writer Germain Greer and radio host Michael Krasny titled “Shakespeare’s Wife,” Greer mentions that Shakespeare left most of the money in his will to throw himself a grand funeral, in an otherwise famished Elizabethan England. His wife got the leftovers. Greer’s reference to Shakespeare’s beds describes this best. She claimed “he gave away the goose down and left [his wife] the duck feathers.” In a similar way Cordelia is only given “duck feathers.” She marries the King of France, which is not dishonorable, but because of her father’s ignorance, pride, and poor judgment, she gives up a fair portion of English land. Nevertheless, in this process Cordelia also gains the courageous and virile skills of independence and survival. Later, Cordelia is left behind by her husband, the King of France, who urgently needs to attend to his “imperfect state” (4.3.3). Once again virility courses through her veins as she takes the reigns of power and assumes the masculine role of Commander in Chief, leading the French Army against Edmund and the powers of Great Britain.

The question is, does Shakespeare reward or punish this reversal of behavior in his play? Will Cordelia end up an acclaimed heroine, or just another cursed martyr like Joan of Arc? In the end, Shakespeare has us believing that Cordelia is a failure. Shakespeare’s play with the standard prescribed gender behaviors has Cordelia being subtly castigated throughout the play. Her untimely demise is unfitting but predictable for such an audacious female character. Still, upon closer inspection, Cordelia manages to take a stand against Great Britain and the conventional stereotypes we have about women who attempt to

assume the reigns of power, risking their own safety and security within a patriarchal structure.

Feminist Theory shares its roots with Deconstruction. It is like a version or flavor of Deconstruction. Both take important ideas from structuralism, but while feminists use structuralism to breakdown stereotypes, Deconstructionists want to breakdown structuralism itself. The main difference is that Feminist Theory ties itself to outside sources like politics and different cultures, while Deconstruction, like New Criticism, is only interested in the text. It closely examines the text and then pulls apart a system of meaning on sections that seem problematic. Feminist Theory wants to “raise our awareness of oppression and bias, showing us how all sorts of exclusions, suppressions, and exploitations are invented, reinvented and perpetuated” (Lynn 228). There are several terms that help explain Feminist Theory better. First is “canon,” which is a group of great works that we have studied. This is important to Feminist Theory because traditionally women have been left out of the canon. Second is “constructed,” which recognizes that meaning does not fall from the sky onto a magical, all-knowing table. Meaning can be created differently by different people. This is valuable to Feminist Theory because it means that change is possible. The third term is “exclusion.” Feminists argue that throughout history women have been excluded from conversations that matter, and they seek to overturn this. Fourth is “gender,” which is not biological sex definition – one is not *born* a certain gender. Gender is a culturally learned set of behaviors. This is important because it takes away the societal restraints on how “feminine” a man can act or how “masculine” a woman might choose to appear. Next is “patriarchy,” which literally means “father-ruled.” Feminists believe western culture is a patriarchy led by males, and they

wish to challenge a culture that makes rules for the other half. The last term is sexist, and just like ageism or racism, sexism confines someone to certain rules or limits. It is hurtful and feminists believe that an awful lot of language and literature in our culture is sexist, often on multiple levels.

Late in *King Lear* Cordelia, the symbol of purity in the play, realizes that good deeds are not always rewarded and says of Lear and herself, “We are not the first / who with the best of meaning have incurred the worst” (5.3.3-4). With her husband, the King of France, now gone, her campaign is quickly quashed by the opposition, and the evil Edmund proclaims, “The battle done, and they within our power” (5.1.69), as he takes his prisoners. This foreshadows Cordelia’s imminent death and Shakespeare’s conclusive stance on gender roles; when there is a strong woman or weak man in his play, they are punished. This is further demonstrated with Edmund’s plan to obtain the British Crown. While deciding what to do with his prisoners, Edmund asks “The question of [whether] Cordelia and her father / Require a fitter place” (5.3.59-60). In one sentence, Edmund reduces Cordelia, the Queen of France, to an ordinary woman, and Lear, the King of Britain, to an old man being led by his daughter. Shakespeare covertly expresses his point of view on how a man and woman should act through this belittlement. In a Shakespearean world, Cordelia, a powerful queen who has taken control of her army, and Lear, a weary king who has given away his power and is considered a puppet by his own people, have both fallen out of their limited boundaries. Shakespeare’s sexist views blossom as Cordelia is further castigated post mortem. While her effeminate father finally grabs ahold of his senses and redeems himself, dying a peaceful death after being forgiven by his wronged daughter who he still believes is breathing at the end causing a “feather to

stir” (5.3.265), Cordelia has no such chance at redemption. She dies a helpless, lonely death hanging from a noose probably feeling more and more forsaken with each final, gasping breath that she took; seeing her father in front of her being led up to the gallows to be hung next, and wondering if her boldness and bravery were the primary causes to these dire consequences. Edmund’s confession of ordering Cordelia’s death in front of his good brother, Edgar, reiterates Shakespeare’s thought on the matter. “To lay the blame upon her own despair / That she fordid herself” (5.3.224-225). Again, it is Cordelia’s fault for being hung since she asked for it by acting manly, gaining power and overstepping her boundaries. Acting bravely is forbidden for a woman in patriarchal cultures, and in Shakespearean terminology “helpless,” “lonely,” and “forsaken” are much more efficient characterizations of a woman. Nevertheless, with closer examination of the play, Cordelia fights back. Sure, her army never took over any British territory, which might have been the intention of the King of France, but he ran away with the Fleur De Lis tucked between his legs, and Cordelia’s one and only goal was to find her father and reaffirm her love for him in his old age. “No blown ambition doth our arms incite / But love, dear love, and our aged father’s right” (4.4.27-28). This noble and selfless act is surely supposed to be the exclusive attribute of a man.

Shakespeare uses a quick rhyming pattern to assemble her words, which means that something was being said by someone important. Despite Cordelia’s exclusion from nearly two-thirds of the play and her continuous berating by an array of character’s, this powerful queen / wife / general / commander in chief / sister / daughter, or to put it in laymen’s terms, this powerful woman, is an important part of Shakespeare’s acclaimed theatrical piece, whether he likes it or he likes it not. Cordelia’s army is able to find and

reunite her with her father, and she is able to grant him love and forgiveness, and restores his sanity once again. Another rare rhyming sequence is spoken in the last lines of the play by the new ruler of Great Britain, Edgar, as an apparent eulogy for the Great Cordelia, confirming her undying importance in Shakespearean literature:

The weight of this sad time we must obey,
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The oldest have borne most; we that are young
Shall never see so much, nor live so long. (5.3.325-328)

In the end, Cordelia remains a strong individual. Although she seems to lack motivation in the eyes of Edmund, and obliquely by Shakespeare, for she doesn't want to take over Great Britain and the rest of the world, she will do everything in her power to liberate her father physically and mentally because he is the world to her. British soil means nothing to her, as she demonstrated at the beginning of the play, if her father is not well. This unselfish, generous, and benevolent display of will and character makes Cordelia great. Perhaps this is why Shakespeare decided to end her life early, so that she doesn't have time to rot and tarnish. Early on in the play, a servant professes, "If...in the end meet the old course of death / Women will all turn monsters" (3.7.99-101). Shakespeare's sexist views that a woman cannot stay virtuous are conceivably a casualty of time. Shakespeare focuses his attention on her failure to give himself a reason to terminate her, but her subtle success still shines through at the end. She rescues her father and even though the odds are stacked against her, she gains her right in the canon, like Joan of Arc, as a martyr. Martyrs, just like feminists, are known for their revolutions and

progressive movements. Hopefully, Cordelia's untimely demise plays a part in providing more living heroines in the future.

Works Cited

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