

In-class Final Exam / Eng 110 / Feminist reading of *King Lear*

Midterm Question:

Feminist critique posits that depictions of women in literature tend to fall into two categories – either the “Mary” figure (the virgin mother, the innocent paragon of virtue, the selfless nurturer and defender of all things benevolent and holy) or the “Eve” figure (the evil seductress, the original sinner, the conniving bitch, the reason for Man’s fall into temptation and animal desire).

Do you think Lear’s daughters in *King Lear* fall into these categories, or do you think they transgress these reductive stereotypes and become something more complex, no longer defined by simple good/bad binary descriptions of intent and behavior? Characterize the women in *King Lear* from a feminist literary perspective, using certain scenes from the play to defend your characterization.

Written by William Shakespeare around the turn of the 16th century, *King Lear* is a tragic play that focuses on a king’s descent into senility and madness. At the outset, Lear has decided it is time for him to find husbands for his daughters Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia. Lear poses a challenge to all three: each must state their love for the king and, in turn, receive lands commensurate with the level of devotion shown. Unlike her sisters who play the “game” by the prescribed rules, Cordelia states her love truly and plainly and is rewarded for stepping outside of the ceremony by unfairly being disowned. It becomes obvious that in Lear’s eyes, his daughters exist solely to support his patriarchy and be his caretakers in his old age. In the end, Lear’s blindness to the true intentions of his daughters leads to his downfall and allows Shakespeare to point out the fallacies inherent in patriarchal rule.

The focus in Feminist Critique lies mainly in a single set of oppositions: namely man versus woman or male versus female. One of the major tenets is that, historically, the favored has been the man as a result of societies influence. In the vast majority of cultures through the ages, men have held a place of power over women, and so, as cultures remained male driven and controlled the canon of works inevitably reflects this and, in a vicious cycle, influences and reinforces these ideals in those same cultures. Feminist Critique ultimately seeks to shine a light on the exclusion or marginalization of women in literature and make people reevaluate the concepts of gender and race constructed within. Though

literature often does not reflect it, women are more complex than the “Eve” or “Mary” archetypes portrayed in media.

Even in the first act it is clear that Lear’s daughters exist mainly to play extremely narrowly defined roles in his patriarchal rule. Lear has called a meeting to announce his plan to unburden himself in his old age and possibly to promote peace in the land. The kingdom is to be divided between Cornwall, Albany, and whichever suitor (Burgandy or France) wins his most loved daughter Cordelia. The King’s decree is that land will be parceled according to how the daughters fair in a test of love and devotion to him. Goneril and Regan play along and state their hollow sentiments of love while Cordelia plainly and truthfully professes that she, “love[s] your Majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less” (1.1 93-94) and though she goes on to try and clarify the caring intent of her words, Lear hears none of it. The oft professed favorite daughter of the king is quickly cast aside when she briefly steps outside of her prescribed role. What, on the surface, seemed to be a test of love is shown to be a test of patriarchal control over his daughters.

Though Lear perceived Cordelia’s actions as an attack on his authority, in truth it is Goneril and Regan who have manipulated the king through the use of his own ceremony and go on to usurp his power at every opportunity. Lear has unjustly and unfairly banished the one daughter that would have cared for and nurtured him in his rapidly increasing senility and dementia. In this way the unfairness of his actions come full circle to hurt him in the end as Lear ends up without family or power, demented, and at the mercy and in the care Cordelia who proves her loyalty in the end. At the same time can Goneril and Regan be blamed for their actions? While undeniably cruel in their methods, how else is a caged animal supposed to act? With the patriarchy bestowing no power on these women how can the reader be surprised that they lash out in attempt to regain control?

Though patriarchy is built on the conceit that men hold the power over the women, Shakespeare clearly points out the contradiction that lies within. If male dominance is predicated on the subservience of women, don’t they ultimately hold some sort of power over the men? As though Lear’s throne (and perhaps his sanity) were built on top of a house of cards, all it takes is the removal of one small piece of the foundation for the entire thing to come down as he is further manipulated by “frail” daughters. Shakespeare both shows the unfair nature of a male dominated society as well as its ultimate fragility through the downfall of *King Lear*.