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ARE THE FEMALE CHARACTERS STEREOTYPED IN KING LEAR AS DEMONISED OR SANCTIFIED WOMEN?

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Are the female characters stereotyped in *King Lear* as demonised or sanctified women?

Before analysing female characters in *King Lear*, we will comment on the main critical approaches to this play and we will see how these affect our reading of *King Lear*.

From the beginnings of the twentieth century up to the sixties there are two main interpretations. The first of these understands *King Lear* as a “Christian Play.”

This is fully understood in the last act where Cordelia heals Lear’s madness. Moreover Lear names her “a soul in bliss”¹, a name which clearly makes reference to Cordelia’s sanctity. On the other hand, a second approach refuses *King Lear* being a “Christian Play.” Why evil goes so long unchecked? Why such a bleak ending? Characters such as Cordelia seek to do good, but they are unprotected by the Gods, and they are surrounded by the chaos created by the evil characters. Man is alone in a godless world. He has to look for his own fate.

From the 1980s onwards, other different interpretations of the play can be found. On one hand, authors such as John Dollimore assert that this is a play about power, property and inheritance. He asserts that Lear loses his mind when he loses his social status. He is no longer a powerful king, and he has also lost power over his daughters. According to him, Shakespeare focuses on what happens when there is a catastrophic redistribution of power. He sees a total collapse. Edgar and Albany want to recover the old order, but there is a black future before them.

Another critic, Leonard Tennenhouse thinks that *King Lear* shows us the dangers of not following the old ways of the patriarchal order.

Apart from these two critics we have another view, that of feminist critics such as Coppelia Kahn and Kathleen McLuskie’s. According to Kahn, Lear goes mad because he is unable to accept his dependence on the feminine, his daughters. Thus, this would be a play about “male anxiety.” However, he is redeemed by means of a loving non-patriarchal relationship with Cordelia. McLuskie, on the other hand, thinks this is an anti-feminine play. She refers to an audience accepting the identification of human nature and male power. So, according to her, we are forced to sympathise with the patriarchs and the masculine power structure that they represent. In her opinion, any movement within the fixed family relationship is seen as destructive, and she also views Cordelia’s “redeeming power” in another light. For her it works less as a redemption of womankind than as a restoration of patriarchy. Thus, women are made either to submit- Cordelia - or must be destroyed- Gonerill and Regan.

When reading *King Lear*, we may ask ourselves: Are female characters stereotyped? Do we have to ascertain Cordelia as the representative of goodness and her sisters as evil women?

At the beginning of the play, Lear’s daughters behave in very different ways. King Lear wants to divide his kingdom in three parts. But to decide which part will correspond to each daughter he proposes a love-test. The better part will correspond to the daughter who tell him he is the most beloved for her. Gonerill and Regan flatter Lear by means of complex, long and exaggerated speeches:

“Sir, I love you more than words can wield the
matter;
Dearer than eyesight, space and liberty;
Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare;
No less than life, with grace, health, beauty,
honour;

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As much as child e'er loved, or father found;
A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable;
Beyond all manner of so much I love you."²

"I am made of that self metal as my sister,
And prize me at her worth. In my true heart
I find she names my very deed of love;
Only she comes too short, -that I profess
Myself an enemy to all other joys,
Which the most precious square of sense possesses;
And find I am alone felicitate In your dear highness' love."³

Cordelia's asides, on the other hand, are characterised by their simplicity, plainness and authentic feeling:

"Then, Poor Cordelia!
And yet not so; since, I am sure, my love's
More richer than my tongue... What shall
Cordelia do? Love, and be silent."⁴

In the same way, Cordelia's turn of speaking in the love-test will be characterised by its simplicity, sincerity and plainness:

"...love your majesty
According to my bond, nor more nor less."⁵

"Good my Lord,
You have begot me, bred me, loved me: I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honour you.
Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
They love you all? Haply when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall
carry
Half my love with him, half my care a duty:
Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all."⁶

According to feminist critics, Cordelia's negative to flatter Lear can be interpreted as an opposition to Lear's authority. She does not want to be ruled by patriarchy. Her response is a passive one. Silence, the only possible way of subversion for upper-class women of the Middle Ages. However, when Cordelia reappears in the fourth act she is not longer a transgressor, but an obedient daughter to Lear.

Cordelia's plainness and sincerity is fully emphasised when she asserts the reason of her being cast away:

“And such a tongue
As I am glad I have not, though not to have it
Hath lost me in your liking.”⁷

About Cordelia we should notice that she only appears at the beginning and at the end of the play, the rest of the play she is absent: a clear example of the prototypical ‘Shakespearean woman’: absent, silent or dead. Cordelia is characterised by her silent and obedient attitude; her sisters, on the other hand, have a full power of speech. This is seen as a ‘fault’. According to feminist critics this is explained in the sense that they are defying male authority.

Cordelia will go to France with the King of France and will not reappear until the fourth act. However, before going away she leaves the way to unfold the true nature of her sisters. This prepares the way for the event changing for the worst.

“The jewels of our father, with washt eyes
Cordelia leaves you: I know what you are,
And like a sister, and most loath to call
Your faults as they are named. Love well our father
To your professed bosoms I commit him:
But yet, alas, stood I within his grace,
I would prefer him to a better place.”⁸

Now, we will centre on Gonerill and Regan. Thus, Gonerill is the first to “unfold” her true feelings for Lear, talking to her steward Oswald:

“If he distate it, let him to my sister,
Whose mind and mine, I know in that are one,
Not to be over-ruled. Idle old man,
That still would manage those authorities
That he hath given away!- Now, by my life,
Old fools are babes again; and must be used
With checks as flatteries, when they are seen
abused.”

Gonerill’s attitude towards Lear cannot be wholly attributed to evil because we do not know if her regrets about Lear’s soldiers bad behaviour are really true or not. However, she asserts her falsehood in the love-test and also comments on the fact that she and Regan will not longer be ruled by their father. They are now those in power, not Lear.

However, the clash between Lear and his daughters is yet to come. This will take place in the scene IV of the first act. Gonerill begins attacking Lear’s soldiers of behaving badly and she will accuse Lear of promoting his soldiers quarrelsome behaviour. Lear’s Fool will be the reporter to the audience of Lear’s being treated badly by his daughters.

“The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long,
That it had its head bit off by its young.”¹⁰

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Lear is so puzzled by the events taking place that he will even ask Gonerill: “Are you our daughter?”¹¹ Whereas Lear gets confused the Fool goes on with his talk:

“May not an ass know when the cart draws the
Horse? - Whoop, Jug! I love thee.”¹²

Lear’s extreme degree of puzzlement will even get to a kind of amnesiac state in which he asks who he really is.

“Doth any here know me?- Why, this is not Lear:
Doth Lear walk thus? Speak thus? Where are
his eyes?”¹³

At the end of the argument Lear feels so enraged, astonished and depressed, that he announces his going to Regan.

“Degenerate bastard! I’ll not trouble thee:
Yet have I left a daughter.”¹⁴

However, Regan is one on the same terms than Gonerill, who before Lear’s arrival at Regan’s castle, sends her a letter telling her all. So, Regan tells Lear:

“O, Sir, you are old;
Nature in you stands on the very verge
Of her confine: you should be ruled, and bed
By some discretion that discerns your State
Better than yourself. Therefore, I pray you,
That to our sister you do make return;
Say you have wrong’d her, sir.”¹⁵

Lear is puzzled, Regan has not acted as he expected. She even wants him to return to Gonerill and ask her forgiveness. He has lost his power, he has not longer a kingdom and his daughters make a fool of him. He has no power of decision. However, Lear will try to soften her by flattering her, putting her in a higher scale than Gonerill.

“Thy tender-hefted nature shall not give
Thee o’er to harshness: her eyes are fierce, but
thine
Do comfort and not burn...”¹⁶

In the middle of the argument, Gonerill enters. Lear begins to accuse her of mistreating him. However, while he gets enraged and passionate, the sisters remained calm and without any sign of passion in them. Both sisters dispossess Lear of all his soldiers. Lear gets mad and goes away to the woods.

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Up to now, there is a clear interpretation of Lear's state. He has lost power over his kingdom and also over his daughters. He becomes a servant of his daughters, a man without a will. Lear is unable to accept this dependence and he gets mad, he cannot accept that he has lost his "male authority" over them. But Lear daughters have a cruel and evil side as the martyrdom inflicted on Gloucester demonstrates. In the seventh scene of the third act, Cornwall and Regan pluck out his eyes. Before the martyrdom, Gloucester will qualify the daughters as monsters, evil creatures:

"Because I would not see thy cruel nails
Pluck out his poor old eyes; nor thy fierce sister
In his anointed flesh stick boarish fangs." ¹⁷

Albany, Gonerill's husband, will put it clear in his speech:

"Tigers, not daughters, what have you perform'd?
A father, and a gracious aged man,
Whose reverence the head-lugg'd bear would lick,
Most barbarous, most degenerate! have you
madded." ¹⁸

However, evil will not go unchecked any more, Albany foretells that something will stop the chaos going on, and if that does not happen somebody should stop it by destroying the monsters: Regan and Gonerill.

"If that the heavens do not their visible spirits
Send quickly down to tame these vile offences,
It will come,
Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
Like monsters of the deep." ¹⁹

Thus, according to Shakespeare's text, Gonerill and Regan are clearly represented as demons, monsters, anything but human. They are responsible for the chaos going on and of the disruption of the state. They are the enemies of the mankind and must be destroyed. Women at power can only bring disgrace, however a saviour will come. And that saviour will be a "sanctified woman": Cordelia. For me, she is a redeeming woman, though for some critics like McLuskie, this is a restoration of patriarchy, but in my opinion Cordelia works as a redemption of the feminine, she is a balance between her sisters.

Throughout Act IV female characters are juxtaposed and contrasted so as to reinforce their antagonistic traits: demonised and sanctified. Thus, in scene II Gonerill openly declares her lusty passion for Edmund:

"O, the difference of man and man! To thee
A woman's services are due: my fool
Usurps my body." ²⁰

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Gonerill's demonisation will be reinforced by names such as "devil" or "be-monster." Albany her husband will even doubt of her being a human: "A woman shape doth shield thee."²¹

In scene IV Cordelia reappears. She is in the French camp near Dover. She asks her soldiers to search for his father, whose daughters have turned him mad. Despite Lear's attitude towards her she does not show anger, hate or any other bad feeling for him, but forgiveness and love.

"No blown ambition doth our arms incite
But love, dear love, and our aged father's right
Soon may I hear and see him!"²²

In her words Cordelia appears a pure, chaste, innocent woman, i.e., a saint or "sanctified woman."

In Scene V, the action centres on Regan. She asks Gonerill's steward why Gonerill writes a letter to Edmund. She makes clear her relation to Edmund:

"My Lord is dead; Edmund and I have talkt;
And more convenient is he for my hand
Than for your lady's..."²³

Thus, Cordelia's chastity of the previous scene is compared to her sister's lust for Edmund. She is put higher on the scale. She is a saint, her sisters are devil-like monsters.

In the seventh scene of the fourth act Cordelia and Lear are reunited and reconciled. Cordelia is again contrasted with her sisters:

"O my dear father! Restoration hang
Thy medicine on my lips; and let this kiss
Repair those violent harms that my two sisters
Have in thy reverence made!"²⁴

I agree with feminist critics like McLuskie in that Cordelia's return is a restoration of patriarchy, of the old order. But this cannot be wholly reduced to male power. Cordelia has also power, she has a group of soldiers under her command. She is autonomous and she does not need the King of France to command her soldiers.

Cordelia's sisters' low passions will arrive at their limit in their clash for Edmund, as the following quotes demonstrate:

"I shall not endure her: dear my Lord
Be not familiar with her."²⁵

"I had rather lose the battle than that sister
Should loosen him and me."²⁶

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The reader notices that these sisters will end tragically. Their lust for Edmund will destroy them. Thus, Cordelia's return brings changes: evil is destroyed, however she will not find a better end.

Gonerill poisons Regan and then stabs herself. Cordelia, on the other hand, is imprisoned together with his father by Edmund. Cordelia's only care is her father, and her father's only care is his beloved daughter. This is clearly appreciated when Edmund imprisons them, and Lear is horrified when Cordelia asks if they will see her sisters:

“He that parts and shall bring a hands from heaven
And fire us hence like foxes. Wipe thine eyes;

The good years shall devour them, flesh and fell
Ere they shall make us weep, we'll see 'em
stave first.”²⁷

Cordelia will later be strangled to death in the jail, and from that shock Lear will die later. Albany and Edgar are horrified, Cordelia was the symbol of a new future, but now a dark future appears before them.

What is the place of women in *King Lear*? All of them die at the end. There is no distinction in that for demonised or sanctified women. Thus, we cannot claim that there is a complete division of women in the play. According to some critics like Coppelia Kahn women are seen as a positive force, thus Lear is redeemed by means of a loving non-patriarchal relationship with Cordelia. But, McLuskie thinks this is only a restoration of patriarchy.

In my opinion, though I agree with McLuskie in considering *King Lear* an anti-feminine play, I do not think that Cordelia's function is a restoration of the “old order.” She is a balance against her sisters. Women like anything in the world are not perfect. Cordelia though being pure, chaste, kind,... has also faults; in the love-test she did not had an active part, thus she could have avoided the chaos created by her sisters. Women then are neither completely evil or completely good, but something in between.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ Shakespeare William: *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, The Shakespeare Headpress Oxford Edition, Wordsworth Editions, Hertfordshire: 1996, p. 917.

² *ibid.* p.885-6

³ *ibid.* p. 886

⁴ *ibid.* p. 886

⁵ *ibid.* p. 886

⁶ *ibid.* p. 886

⁷ *ibid.* p. 887

⁸ *ibid.* p. 888

⁹ *ibid.* p. 890

¹⁰ *ibid.* p. 893

¹¹ *ibid.* p. 893

¹² *ibid.* p. 893

¹³ *ibid.* p. 893

¹⁴ *ibid.* p. 893

¹⁵ *ibid.* p. 901

¹⁶ *ibid.* p. 901

¹⁷ *ibid.* p. 909

¹⁸ *ibid.* p. 911

¹⁹ *ibid.* p. 911

²⁰ *ibid.* p. 911

²¹ *ibid.* p. 911

²² *ibid.* p. 913

²³ *ibid.* p. 913

²⁴ *ibid.* p. 917

²⁵ *ibid.* p. 918

²⁶ *ibid.* p.918

²⁷ *ibid.* p.920