

**LEAR'S DAUGHTERS BY ELAINE FEINSTEIN AND WTG: A FEMINIST  
REREADING**

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**Abstract**

*Lear's Daughters is a feminist reading of the play King Lear by William Shakespeare. The hidden patriarchal biases in the play are brought out in a subtle way by Elaine Feinstein. The play Lear's Daughters presents each of the daughters as a distinctive individual with personal interests. Different from their villainous representation in Shakespeare's King Lear, the daughters are allowed to introduce themselves and define their personal interests at the beginning of this play. The play challenges and redefines many popular readings of King Lear.*

**Keywords:** feminist, patriarchal, villainous etc.

**The emergence of Feminist Gender Studies**

Shakespeare lived in a patriarchal world dominated by men. On close examination, Shakespearean plays reveal male insecurities about women. Men's need to dominate and possess women, their fear of growing old and various other psychological problems they faced can be traced in these plays. "Beginning from the 1970s, women writers of the British theatre set to write about innovative topics concerning women's issues that had been unaddressed previously in the British literary canon monopolised by male writers. Rewriting the male-dominated canon is one of the ways women writers adopted to object to the dominance of patriarchy in literary works and reflect their unease about the exclusion of women from the works of male writers" Ozmen 3. Feminist and gender studies on Shakespeare gained further momentum after 1980.

### **Why rewrite Shakespeare?**

Shakespeare has been acknowledged for his depiction of a universal human nature. But women playwrights of contemporary British theatre think that some of his plays are gender-biased, and representing human nature sometimes meant representing only male nature for Shakespeare. Consequently, there was increasing discontent among women writers over Shakespeare's approach to his female characters, and they began to alter his approach with a more positive representation of these characters (Ozmen 6-7).

### **Elaine Feinstein and WTG –Lear's Daughters Contribution towards Re-reading Shakespeare**

*Lear's Daughters* is a group-devised production of Women's Theatre Group (WTG) together with Elaine Feinstein, focusing on the influence of the patriarchal family structure on the female members of the Lear family. Women's Theatre Group (WTG) is one of "the first professional feminist theatre companies" in England. They express the voices of marginalised groups liberally (Ozmen 3). The writer "Feinstein reinforces her feminist stance by eliminating the male characters, making the Fool an androgynous character, and the daughters and Lear's wife the new protagonists" (Ozmen 1). *Lear's Daughters* offers a feminist reading of Shakespeare's play *King Lear*. It is a ninety-minute prequel to *King Lear's* dysfunctional family.

Besides the feminist movement, other socio-cultural developments in Britain also contributed to the development of feminist theatre. In the 1960s and 1970s England, a number of acts that were passed in favour of women helped establish equality between men and women in society. Some of these improvements are listed by Wandor as follows: "In 1967 an Abortion Act was passed, for the first time making abortion legal; in the same year an Act partially legalizing male homosexuality came into force. In 1969 the Divorce Reform Act eased conditions for divorce, and in 1970 an Equal Pay Act set terms for equal pay for men and women" ("Women Playwrights"55). All of these acts were passed to ameliorate the conditions of women in those years; hence, the socio-cultural developments in British society in terms of gender equality began to be reflected in the world of theatre (qtd. in Ozmen 4).

In the play *King Lear*, Lear is presented as a bruised patriarch desperate for a son. His wife is driven into madness and an early grave. His daughters are all screwed up. Goneril, the

detested eldest daughter is a frustrated painter forced to assume the responsibility of the state on her mother's death. Regan has a talent for carving but she is neglected. Cordelia, the youngest is forced to play daddy's darling. The play clearly points out the reason why they had problems in later life. It has a fairytale fascination but offers a Freudian solution to Shakespeare's play. Goneril's problems are due to parental abuse and Regan had to abort a child before marrying Cornwall.

According to MicheleneWandor, the most outstanding aims of feminism that have been used in feminist theatre are:

- (1) To challenge a biological determinism which says that men are superior to women
- . . . (2) To change the position of women in some way. (3) To assert the importance of self-determination for women, individually and/or collectively ( 142).

*Lear's Daughters* offers a feminist reading of Shakespeare's play. In line with the title of the play which reveals a change of focus, the protagonist of Shakespeare's work is now marginalised, or rather reduced to the position of an offstage character, and his daughters are brought to the foreground. Lear is not present on the stage. His words and ideas are relayed to the audience as he is enacted by the Fool when necessary (Ozmen 8).

### **The changes made in the Adaptation**

The Fool -- one of the most important characters in Shakespeare's play-- is deliberately turned into an androgynous character to blur the strict gender differences in the previous work.

The Nurse, one of the newly introduced characters in the play, reports that "[n]o-one knows whether this Fool is a woman or a man, for it has a woman's voice, but walks with the carriage and stature of a man"(*Lear's Daughters* 9.226).

The play ignores the male characters of the source text and instead introduces other female characters such as the Nurse/Nanny and the mother of the daughters. (Ozmen 9)

In addition to these technical innovations, *Lear's Daughters* does not in any way refer to the male characters of the source text positively. Besides being introduced as an offstage character, references to Lear throughout the play show that he is not an ideal family man. The first reference to him is made by the Fool at the beginning of the play: "There was an old man called Lear / Whose daughters, da da dada, fear . . ." (1.217).

Lear is presented as a source of fear for his daughters even in this first mention of him. One may wonder how come Lear is a source of fear for his daughters if he is no longer a part of the play; however, although he has been removed from the stage and his central position, Lear still maintains a significant presence in the lives of his daughters with his power to make decisions on behalf of them as he still arranges their marriages (Ozmen 9).

Lear is not affectionate towards his wife and touches her without emotion, which causes the queen to get tired of giving in to Lear and having sex with him without consent. What is more, whether or not the queen lives is so unimportant for Lear that even on her funeral day Lear is seen flirting with a woman which is seen by his daughters.

For Lear, all women are the same. His belief is that if one cannot give birth to a son for him, another will. Another example that shows Lear's sexual addiction is the implied incestuous relationship between him and his daughter Cordelia. She is their favourite daughter of Lear, and he is reported to be quite caring and friendly when he is with her whereas he is rather negligent towards the other female characters in the play. As is revealed through the stories told by the Nurse, Lear was there only at Cordelia's birth while he was at the library when Regan and Goneril were born. The difference between Cordelia and the other daughters is pointed out by the Fool as she questions on the funeral day of the queen: "[W]ho will take her place [the queen's] at the King's right hand? Cordelia the favourite, Goneril the eldest, or Regan the outsider?" (8.224). The fact that Cordelia is Lear's favourite daughter is understood as it is mentioned that when Lear returns from a sporting tournament, he holds Cordelia and kisses her on the cheek while the other sisters can only look at them (5.222). However, this favouritism gains another meaning when Lear wants Cordelia to dance in front of other men, which is reminiscent of Herod's obsession with Salome's dancing and her beauty in Oscar Wilde's *Salome*. Cordelia's account evokes the possibility of an incestuous inclination on the part of her father towards her. (Ozmen 10-11)

### **Incest and Absence of parental figures**

In this sense, the stage functions as a microcosmic reflection of the daughters' lives as the protagonists of this play. As the king and the queen do not appear on the stage throughout the play, they do not exist as parental figures in the lives of their daughters, either.

### **The psychological function of the story of Nanny**

The girls know their father only through the stories the Nurse tells them about Lear. He is so much out of the girls' lives that in scene 7, the daughters imagine how it would be like meeting their father and spending time with him, and they make the Nanny tell stories about Lear. They know that these stories are not true; however, the thought of knowing him better and having him as a proper father figure in their lives fascinates them. Saunders argues that the daughters want to listen to these stories as an "attempt to salvage memories and recollections from the past in order to convince themselves of their father's love" (407). As they are bereft of paternal love, they try to substitute this lack with the Nurse's fictional stories, and this instance shows that despite his neglect of his daughters, Lear remains as the ideal figure in their heads (Ozmen 13).

The play *Lear's Daughters* presents each of the daughters as a distinctive individual with personal interests. Different from their villainous representation in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the daughters are allowed to introduce themselves and define their personal interests at the beginning of this play. According to their self-presentation, each of them is associated with a form of art. For instance, Cordelia expresses her interest in words; Regan says that she likes the feel of wood and giving shape to wood, and Goneril likes painting and all the colours. Cordelia's love of words corresponds to literature; Regan's carving of the wood refers to her talent in handicraft, and Goneril is associated with painting.

The fact that each daughter is interested in one particular field of art is suggestive of women's struggle to become successful in different fields of art in Britain at the time the play was written as they were claiming a space in the public sphere in those years following the development of feminism.

For Lear, marriage is like business and the daughters are like commodities as evidenced by the fact that he keeps a book with figures displaying which of the daughters is going to marry whom. When the girls look at the book, they see that Regan is to be married to Cornwall. In this business relationship between Lear and Cornwall, Regan turns into a commodity sold by her father (Ozmen 14).

On account of this realisation, as well as their experience of Lear's oppressive personality in other occasions, Goneril who likes colours loses sight of them; Regan who likes wood

carving has to quit it as her father commands her to do so; Cordelia's vocabulary is reduced to two words: "yes" and "no." However, despite their suppression and loss of enthusiasm for life, the daughters become triumphant at the end of the play as all of them reach out their hands to touch Lear's crown when the Fool throws it. This scene is especially significant as it totally excludes Lear from the play, and questions whether sorority has been established among the daughters with equal power in their hands, or there is a hint of rivalry among them as all of them reach for the crown at the same time (Ozmen 16).

The play's final words are uttered by the Fool: "An ending. A beginning"(14.232). To answer the question of what is ending and what is beginning at this stage, Bradley suggests that "[t]he Fool's final assessment, an ending/beginning, is a reference to the end of the Lear's Daughters and the beginning of King Lear"(223). Considering the fact that *Lear's Daughters* functions as a prequel to Shakespeare's original, one may assert that the reason for the daughters' enmity against their father in King Lear is answered in this play by Feinstein. If Lear had not been an indifferent oppressive father, his daughters would not have had a grudge against him as seen in Shakespeare's play. *King Lear* "is the story of patriarchy and a particular monarchy whose perversion of love and power produces inexorable violence, betrayal, and chaos" (Kordecki, 5).

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