
King Lear: Psychoanalytical Approach To King Lear

Abstract

In undertaking a psychoanalytical approach to King Lear, this paper treads in the footsteps of Freud in his 'The Theme of the Three Caskets.' Clearly early Jacobean society was very different from our own; expectations of patriarchy and the place of daughters was only partly covered by the image of the now dead Virgin Queen Elizabeth. One theory alone will not be enough to explain the complexities of the text and modern ideas such as historicism and feminism are also shown to bring new insights, even though they are insights the playwright themselves may not have understood.

Key Words: King Lear, Psychoanalysis, Shakespeare, Freud.

Introduction

This paper will undertake a psychoanalytical approach in order to analyze King Lear. This approach can be taken back to Freud's 'The Theme of the Three Caskets, (1913)' in which Freud analyses the casket in Merchant of Venice and the relationship Lear has with his daughters in Lear. Applying Freud to Shakespeare presents difficulties in the fact that Shakespeare himself would, naturally, have been completely unaware of psychoanalysis and to understand the past it is often necessary to wear the spectacles of the past. We do not necessarily share the ideas and beliefs of those in the past today and this can cloud our appreciation of the works.

Modern Psychoanalysis of King Lear:

Freud thought of the three daughters of Lear representation of the three fates from Greek legend, Cordelia represents death and her reluctance to speak:

"What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent" Jay Halio sees this line as indicative of the fact that there is at that moment dumbness from Cordelia which psychoanalysts interpret as a representation of death. As Lear approaches the last stages of his death, he seemingly is seeking to reward flattery rather than love (p.63).

We may in fact see Lear as having 'a terror of being loved, of needing to be loved.' Essentially, rather than turn to true love, Lear attempts to bribe his daughters for flattery and love with sections of his kingdom. 'For some spirits, to be loved knowing that you cannot return that love is the most radical of psychic tortures,' for Halio this is the root cause of the insanity of Lear. The significance for Freud is not that Lear is old, but in the fact that he is actually dying (p.301)

"the doomed man is not willing to renounce the love of women; he insists on hearing how much he is loved..."

Thus, applying psychoanalysis leads us to a greater possible understanding of Lear's

motivations and what he seeks from his decision at the start of the play. The true love that we see Cordelia offering Lear has to be rejected as that love seemingly exposed Lear to self-exposure and feelings of shame as he does not believe he is worthy of that love. Other writers exploring psychoanalysis of the play have seen the ageing Lear searching for a relationship with Cordelia that goes beyond that of father and daughter, Coppelia Kahn feels that the absence of the mother-figure is significant as it gives the girls only the father-figure to aid their development. Lear, Kahn feels, views Cordelia as a 'daughter-mother', the old male looking for the comfort of motherhood in his last years. If Lear is the embodiment of the Oedipus complex, something Freud considers all boys are born with, then Kahn sees Lear leave this behind at the eve of the death of Cordelia; this death was necessary for Kahn as Shakespeare wished to show the pain of separation from your mother (p.95)

Kahn links the theory to the society of the day. She writes "Recent historical studies of the Elizabethan family, its social structure and emotional dynamics, when considered in the light of psychoanalytic theory, provide a backdrop against which Lear's family drama takes on new meaning as a tragedy of masculinity..." (p.97)

Lear represents older patriarchy; he fails to impose that patriarchal control within his own domestic setting. Saunders also presents Lear within the frame of a social and family dislocation and collapse. He sees the play as 'a nursery in pre-Oedipal realms of maternal gesture (p.401), Within the Elizabethan and Jacobean (King Lear was first performed in 1605 in the early years of the reign of James 1st) household the nature of patriarchy was strong, in this society it was: "patriarchal in that the husband and father lorded it over his wife and children with the quasi-absolute authority of a despot..."(p.271). Lear expects to be able to control his daughters' views, and the views of those around him, through patronage and power. But he deceives himself as the words spoken, bar for Cordelia's, are false. It is notable that in Elizabethan England, there had been a woman in charge, Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen, who God had placed above men. "The female was no less female for possessing patriarchal powers..."(p.103), Elizabeth clearly had to place herself above the court, wary of how her mother had been executed for alleged sexual misconduct, the projection of her image had to make her appear untouchable and unique, a cult to worship in every way as strong as for the Virgin Mary. (Tennenhouse,p.103)

Noting Oedipal concerns within the play, it is also of interest that in the opening scene Lear is also presenting his daughter Cordelia for marriage and possible suitors in the form of Burgundy and France are presenting themselves. The absence of the mother means that the father in essence passes his daughter directly to the suitor and Cordelia requires the dowry, without which she is in a weak position to marry. It is possible, as suggested by Rudnytsky, that Lear actually sets up the so called 'love test' in the pre-knowledge that Cordelia would fail and therefore saving him from having to marry her off to either of her suitors; that his subconscious wished him to keep his youngest daughter for himself. (Rudnytsky,p.103)

Focusing on the relationship between Lear and his daughters and applying psychoanalysis may illuminate parts of the text, and show aspects of the period, a time written after the death of Queen Elizabeth. Queen Elizabeth created an image for herself, was suspect to flattery and used her own sexual allure in order to control those around her. By the 1590's however the queen was in old age and her powers were waning. In late medieval texts the body of the Kingdom often connects directly into the body of the monarch and as Lear seeks to give away his daughter, he also seemingly is giving away his kingdom. (ibid)

Lear: When were you want to be so full of songs, sirrah?’

Fool: I have used it, nuncle, ever since thou madest thy daughters thy mothers. For when thou gavest them the rod, and put'st down thine own breeches...’ (1:4:124-126).

One writer has connected these lines as exposing ‘Lear's quasi- incestuous, emotionally infantile relationship with his daughters,’(p.16), which is exposed through Cordelia’s refusal to “love him all.” We can see the ensuing tantrum by Lear in the Oedipal frame of the small boy who requires the mother’s exclusive love. The same writer finds strangeness in how Lear begins to divide up his kingdom as soon as the first daughter speaks, “it is perhaps not fanciful to understand Goneril and Regan as Lear’s mistresses, at least on an emotional level, while Cordelia fulfils the role of wife...” (Beauclark,p.17)

Essential to a psychoanalytical approach is the place of dreams, considered in Freudian thought to be important and interpretable through measured consideration and analysis. Shakespeare has used dreams to signify disturbed characters (for example Richard III in the night before Bosworth) and the desire of sleep “perchance to dream” sees sleep as a natural remedy for the diseased mind bordering on madness. Sleep allows the ‘other’ to come close, as seen in ‘Midsummer Night’s Dream,’ and nature in a world still lit only by candlelight is more immediate and ‘dangerous’ than we may perceive it today. (Blass,p.71)

Opresshd nature sleeps,”(3:6:95)

In Lear the main protagonist succumbs to madness due to being obsessed with the supposed wrongs he suffers, and yet ‘he is subsequently restored to sanity by conventional remedies, conventionally applied by a doctor – herbal medicine, sleep, clean garments, music...’(p.63), Neely sees Lear as the least supernatural of the plays of the time, compared to Hamlet or Macbeth, Lear is not mad due to a supernatural intervention, but his own self distraction and the predicament of his own making. (Neely,p.63).

There are those who consider placing a more modern theory such as psychoanalysis on a Renaissance text. Stephen Greenblatt in his essay “Psychoanalysis & Renaissance Culture” for Parker & Quint considered that ‘psychoanalysis cannot be used to explain the “causes” of a selfhood whose very definition not only preceded psychoanalysis but is also presupposed by it...” (p.221), Therefore for Greenblatt psychoanalysis of a Renaissance text is irrelevant as this means of analyzing the motivations of characters was not one recognized or known at the time. It could equally be argued that debating whether Shakespeare was a feminist is a redundant argument as the debate over feminism would not have been one, he would have considered. It is a mistake to place new views on the past, to judge the past on today’s ideas. Greenblatt takes a historicist line in his analysis, positioning the work of Shakespeare within the wider struggles of the century to redefine the values of society, something that would later erupt in civil conflict.(ibid,p.165), However, whereas Schiesari considers Greenblatt to be correct in dismissing the relevance of Freudian psychoanalysis they feel the Lacan psychoanalysis in which the self is rooted within the “other” of patriarchy remains relevant. In Lear this could be applied as clearly patriarchal society is the root of much of what goes wrong within the text. (Schiesari,p.233).

The storm raging around Lear, the thunder and rains represent the power of the tormented Lear, the overwhelming passions that engulf him and set him in darkness. ‘In the storm we see

nature herself convulsed by the same horrible passions; the common mother turning on her children, to complete the ruin they have wrought upon themselves.’, Thus Shakespearean scholar AC Bradley sees Mother Nature mirroring the disturbed order of the play, showing nature in turmoil due to the usurpation of the natural order(Bradley,p.221)

Michael Conran holds as ‘ridiculous’ some theorists who in producing psychoanalysis of the play have reduced it to a patient, looking for ideas in the text and discovering things that are ‘manifestly not there.’(Conran,p.63), Conran cites Ellie Sharpe as a critic imposing psychoanalysis erroneously, seeking to provide a case for Lear’s three daughters projecting differing aspects of Shakespeare’s own mother, and his feelings about his father represented by the cruel Cornwall, However, Conran supports the idea that psychoanalysis can aid the process of understanding how Shakespeare directs our attention to the difficulties man encounters with regard to his mental health; there is a value in using the insights Shakespeare had into the human condition and applying them within modern thinking. As new concepts and ideas arrive with a new generation, so the strengths of the plays of Shakespeare are seen, that they can adjust to the new thinking applied to them; this reflects in turn how they are presented on stage. Plays can be reinvented for a new generation, reflecting the concerns of the age they are performed within. Lear has never been as popular on the stage as Macbeth or Hamlet, the great tragedies written at the same time, it is put on less in the theatre and many find the decline of a human being painful to watch. (ibid,p.64) .

There is a great bleakness within King Lear, one in which the central protagonist is stripped of everything, and yet within the storm that leaves the characters stripped of shelter, warmth, clothing and status, we also enter a ‘physical and psychological storm engendered by the sleep of reason.’(p.103), McLeish &Unwin see the storm scene as an apocalypse, one in which even in the worst of situations there is still a capacity to change the world for the better, they see the three characters in the wild as the preachers of the coming social revolution – the Ranters, Adamites and Levellers – those who used the ‘apparently insane language of inspiration.’ Of course, the same concerns over applying a twentieth century interpretation onto the play, in applying psychoanalysis, can also apply when presenting the characters in reference points also unknown to Shakespeare at his time of writing. General statements such as the use of the weather to parallel the mood and events of the play are commonplace in literary analysis, sometimes it is quite plausible that a writer such as Shakespeare was using dramatic techniques we still apply frequently today. (McLeish&Unwin,p.103)

Whenever a critic places ‘interpretation’ on a text, a new way of seeing the text can be found. Christians, for example, place Lear’s suffering as necessary for his soul’s redemption and the purgatory he goes through as required for that very saving of his self. Whereas some would see a Christian reading, where those who sin must pay, as helpful for wider appreciation of the text, others see the ending as the restoration of a natural order in society as Edgar takes up duties of rule and addresses male survivors. One critic called the end scene ‘excruciating’ and one in which the plays, paradoxes are solved only through the audiences’ communal experience. (Crockett ,p.70), For many years this ending was actually rewritten with a ‘happy ending’ rewritten by restoration playwright Nahum Tate in which Lear and Gloucester are reunited with their children and virtue is rewarded. It remained the accepted version until 1838 and many, including Samuel Johnston, preferred it. As we link theories into the play, we can clearly see that what audiences have looked for within it has changed over time and critical appreciation of the play has also differed. If a historicist position is taken, as it is by Greenblatt, then we can seek a view on Lear that is a “post Christian” situation Greenblatt, (p.181).

Clearly, we have a play that lends itself well to psychoanalysis, one in which the only person Lear allows to criticize him is his fool; and yet the fool has more wisdom than practically any other character there. The fool in his relationship with Lear is funny and honest, but he is also loyal and braves the winds and the storms with his master. When Lear comments at the end that his poor fool is hanged (5:3:17) there is a genuine sadness felt the loss of one of the only real friends the King had. Writers have identified a close connection between Cordelia and the fool (even suggesting the part was originally played by the same actor) The analysis of the role of the fool for Lear suggests that 'the King has found himself a device whereby he may tell himself home truths which, though coming from within, can be tailored in a way not to interfere with his descent into madness and rage...' (Wise & Mills, p.71), If Lear indulges in a narcissist self-sufficiency, the fool would appear to supply a need. After the banishment of Cordelia, he frets visibly and looks for his fool, the fool shows the audience the paucity of depth in Lear's thinking and points the way to ensuing madness. The fool pines away after Cordelia is no longer there and the message of Edgar at the end of the play to 'speak what we feel, not what we ought to say,' (5:1:300) appears tied into the culture of the time, where self-serving flattery of those in power was starting to be questioned by the 'lower orders.' As Puritanism grew in strength it often was connected to groups who looked for a more equal society. (ibid).

Conclusion

As Patricia Parker in her introduction to the book 'Shakespeare and the Question of Theory' suggests the emphasis should often lie more within the theories than the theory, within this paper we have concentrated upon a psychoanalysis position, but have also seen the influences of historicism, feminism and Christianity as influential in the play. In doing so we have applied new theories to old drama, allowing the theories themselves to show light upon the psychology of the characters who in many respects may have reflected the concerns and aspirations of the audience of the day. Shakespeare was writing for Jacobean society, where the male had once again ascended to the throne, but more radical ideas were fermenting ready to create the civil war that was to come. In this often-unsettling play applying modern ideas comes naturally as new audiences and directors approach the work.

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