

Jane Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acres*
viewed as a feminist
revising of
Shakespeare...



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William Shakespeare's *King Lear* recounts a tale of a father and his three daughters as he decides to divide up his kingdom based on who loves him the most. Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* is a modern day *King Lear* farm with Larry Cook's three daughters, Ginny, Rose and Caroline. Jane Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acres* can be viewed as an adaptation of William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. More specifically, Smiley's novel can be seen as a feminist criticism upon Shakespeare's *King Lear* by in turn criticizing the male dominated roles that overpower the play. This is evident in a variety of parallels present between the two texts such as the whole of the novel being presented through Ginny's eyes but also questions as to whether Smiley's novel actually being considered feminist. One of the theories that I will be focusing on is Edmonson and Holbrook's book of Shakespeare's Creative Legacies (2016) which highlights the potential of modern authors rewriting Shakespeare. Such ideas include marginalized voices being given more prominence in a modern setting for examples in *King Lear* females do not have a dominant voice throughout the play due to social hierarchies.

In contrast, Jane Smiley presents a far more female dominated voice throughout her novel therefore showing how marginalized voices are reinvented. Another theory that can be applied here is Genette's (1997) theory of hyper textuality which discusses the relationship between the hypertext and the hypotext. This relates to *A Thousand Acres* and *King Lear* as the plot of the novel is based off of Shakespeare's play however another term of Genette's (1997) that can be applied here which is 'revaluation' whereby a character is made to be seen more positively in the hypertext. In this case, Goneril is seen to be more of a positive character in the form of

Ginny which overall supports the argument that Smiley's novel is a feminist revising of King Lear. Within Smiley's novel, a connection can be made between the natural world and the female body. This is highlighted by Diana Lombardic (2014, pg. 7) as the treatment of Larry Cook's land 'parallels the treatment of his daughters'. This is further cemented in Smiley's novel whereby Rose makes the bold statement of "We were just his (...) like the pond or the houses or the hogs or the crops" (Smiley, 1992, pg. 191). Through this stance, we can say that the female body is viewed as purely something for males to have ownership of and to tame which is a result of male farming techniques.

In the same way, King Lear also has this idea of female ownership as each of the respective daughters are owned by their respective husbands. However, it could be said that this exploitation of Ginny is what leads to her eventual regeneration as a character which Book 6 of *A Thousand Acres* focuses on. It can be described that Ginny is 'given a second chance' (Lombardic, 2014, pg. 10). Ginny says that in the city "nothing is time bound", this shows how Ginny is given an independence that she has never been able to experience before and arguably, all of the events on the farm have made her stronger as a character and have enabled her to escape her life on the farm which completely argues against the idea that the female body is something for males to tame and to have ownership of. In this sense, Ginny could perhaps be seen as figure of feminism in this novel because even though she hasn't had any contact or interaction with feminism, this makes her even stronger as a character as she has made this discovery of independence on her own, without the support of anybody else. This therefore supports the idea that

this is a feminist revising of King Lear. Edmonson and Holbrook (2016) present the idea that many authors make the decision to rewrite Shakespeare as many of the marginalized voices can be reinvented and be given more importance. Lombardic (2014, pg. 22) states that presenting the whole novel ' through Ginny's eyes makes *A Thousand Acres* a powerful tale of inequality and of victimhood'. This is further reinforced by where Rose boldly declares to Ginny " We had sex in my bed" (Smiley, 1992, pg. 190). By having the whole novel told through Ginny's perspective not only gives power to Ginny but gives power to the female voice in general and so reinforces Edmonson and Holbrook's idea of having marginalized voices reimaged and being more suited towards a modern audience.

Not only does Smiley reinforce Edmonson and Holbrook's ideas but also implements Genette's (1997) idea of ' revaluation' whereby, as a response to the hypertext, Smiley takes advantage of the lack of a female voice instead giving it a greater and more positive prominence to it, supporting the argument that Smiley's novel can be considered feminist. This use of a female voice is completely contrasted in King Lear where it is a heavily male dominated play where the majority of the dialogue is spoken by males. Smiley uses this and reinvents the overall character of Goneril as she allows the character to give her perspective on the events unfolding automatically giving power to the female voice, therefore supporting the idea of the text being feminist. Conversely, there are many people who would argue that *A Thousand Acres* is not a feminist text and that the character of the Ginny and Rose stick to traditional stereotypes, those that were present in Shakespeare's time. One user by the name of Violet Wells on Goodreads

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(2015) described Ginny as being 'self-effacing, subservient' and being 'submissive to both her father and husband'. By taking this stance, we could say that this could be considered non-feminist. Ginny describes settings out 'sausage, fried eggs, hash brown potatoes, cornflakes, English muffins and toast, coffee and orange juice.' (Smiley, 1992, pg. 28). The length of this sentence is long and separated by commas, showing it is a list and is something that is done on a regular basis. However, the nonchalant tone of which she says this could suggest that she does not mind doing these tasks. Through this interpretation, it is therefore questionable as to whether this is truly a feminist novel as she displays typical female stereotypes such as being submissive to the males in her life. This is similar to *King Lear* as all of the daughters are subservient to their father and their husbands. Therefore, we could say that Smiley certainly incorporates elements of Shakespeare's work into her own. However, on the other hand, Jennifer Bolmefalk (2012, pg. 5) argues that *A Thousand Acres* takes place 'right at the end of the second wave of feminism' and suggests that due to the farm's isolation and its lack of interaction with the city, it 'remains unchanged by the progress of second wave feminism' (2015, pg. 6). By taking this stance, we can therefore explain the behaviors of both Ginny and Rose because they have not been able to experience these changes that society was going through at the time. In this sense, there is a more justifiable reason for Ginny and Rose being subservient to Larry.

However, in *King Lear*, there doesn't seem to be this same acknowledgment towards the daughters as even towards the end they seem to remain as one-dimensional characters. To conclude, *A Thousand Acres* could be certainly be

read as a feminist revising of *King Lear* through the empowerment of the female voice in the form of Ginny meaning that this could be a lot more applicable to the modern world. As opposed to *King Lear* where there are many gaps and spaces but Smiley uses this to her advantage and completely reinvents it by filling in the spaces that Shakespeare fails to acknowledge.