

The importance of mother figure in king lear

Literature



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This line goes when Lear arrives at Gloucester's house to look for his second daughter, Regan after he is expelled by Cornwall, his first daughter. In depth of his heart, Lear still holds the hope that Regan will be kind to her according to what she has said in the love test. He later finds that his messenger who carries the letter to Regan is in the stock, which he thinks is a humiliation to himself as he says "this shame". Though Kent, the messenger, arrives at Regan's place a little bit earlier than Cornwall's post, Regan reads the letter from the latter first. To this point, Lear isn't able to hold up all the feelings, depression, anger, loss, anymore and thus he speaks the sentence above. He goes on: "Hysterica [?]passio, down, thou climbing sorrow:

Thy element's below! ..." The words "Hysterica passio" is the Latin term for hysteria, which is usually taken as a female affliction thought to arise from the womb. The last word "below" also indicates this is from the lower part of human body. We can see that Lear uses these three words: mother, Hysterica, and below, which are very feminine when he is near breakdown.

Why does Lear take such feminine words? What does it mean or symbolize? In this play, there is no queen who is not only the mother of all the citizens in the country but also the mother of princesses. The three princesses, Cornwall, Regan, and Cordelia, were raised up not on their mother but on their father. In other words, Lear is not only their father but their mother. To maintain the image of the father figure and king which is strong and thought as the only source of love, power, and authority, Lear has to suppress his emotions, his more feminine aspect as traditional Chinese father or male images, real men do not easily cry (男不轻易哭). Men are not allowed to demand for love or show his feelings.

However, when he is expelled by the first daughter, refused, or humiliated, by the second daughter, and far away from the third daughter, he feels a sense of regret, anger, abandon, and sorrow. All he wants like other old men at his age is just the company of his children, which is the simplest thing in the world, but he chose to break the father-daughter relationship with Cordelia and now the other two abandon him. He feels loss and all the feelings just break out at the same time. He wants love and cries for that.

At the beginning of the play, it seems that Cordelia is the most favorite daughters of Lear. Though he has decided which part of his kingdom belongs to which person, he still holds a love test to fulfill his pride since he thinks that Cordelia loves him the most and would say the most touching words to him. We can tell the voice and tone are different from the first and the second time. He expects Cordelia so much that when Cordelia didn't meet his expectation, he abandons her. But Cordelia accepts him when Lear arrives her place. Lear can't believe it, because he doesn't think he deserve it. He even begs for Cordelia's forgiveness:

“ Pray, do not mock me: I am a very foolish fond old me...”[?] just like a child who made little mistakes and wants to make up and then Cordelia is like a mother now. In conclusion, mother figures take turns show up in the play. Cordelia can be a daughter and a mother at the same time and Lear just suppresses his emotional part.