

Introduction

Lear's Daughters (1987) is the co-creation of Elaine Feinstein (an English novelist, poet, and translator born in 1930) and the Women's Theatre Group (WTG), 'one of the first and most enduring of Britain's feminist companies' (Bennett: 51). By virtue of its communal genesis the play puts the very idea of authorship to the question and challenges long-entrenched notions circulating around the individuality of the author. Those notions have a great deal to do with who gains a place in the traditional canon and how that place is constructed and sustained. Shakespeare is a singular example of an authoritative writing presence that anchors canonical notions of excellence and cultural value, and it is no accident that WTG undertook the revision of a major Shakespearean tragedy from the perspective of a feminist collective.

Lizbeth Goodman, in a discussion of the work's collaborative origins, summarizes that 'Feinstein worked with the company [Gwenda Hughes, Janys Chambers, Hilary Ellis, Maureen Hibbert, and Hazel Maycock] in devising some ideas, and then went away to write the script independently. The script which she submitted, however, was found to be unsatisfactory by the company. A rushed series of workshops followed, out of which emerged a revised version of the script, which was used in the first touring production of 1987' (1993a: 97). Goodman notes the different ways of attributing authorship to both Feinstein and the WTG in handbills and programmes, not to mention in the first published version of the play, which ascribes the 'idea to Elaine Feinstein' [Griffin and Aston: 19] while stating that the play was 'written by: Adjoa Andoh, Janys Chambers, Gwenda Hughes, Polly Irvin, Hazel Maycock, Lizz Poulter, and Sandra Yaw' (20), a list significantly different from the list Goodman produces in both *Contemporary Feminist Theatres* and 'Women's Alternative Shakespeares.'

The inconsistencies of authorial attribution that are part of the play's cultural presence produced, in Goodman's estimation, 'an underlying discomfort [in audiences and critics] with the notion of the [communally] devised work. This discomfort may be related to the lack of an individual author, a situation which eliminates the identifiable "subject" (or individual) to be criticized in relation to the "object" which is the play' (1993a: 99). The way in which the play troubles traditional notions of authorship reminds us of the theatre as the site of collaborative effort, and of the difficulties that arise when positing the dramatist as the sole and uncomplicated source of the voices that speak from the stage. This situation has long vexed Shakespeare studies, where enormous effort has been expended on addressing so-called corrupt texts. The purpose of this effort has been to restore and identify an uncontaminated, 'authentic' Shakespearean voice to texts that likely came into being as a function of complex collaborations among different playwrights, directors, actors, and editors.

An adaptation that is a prequel to *King Lear*, but also an adaptation in the sense that it reshapes the ways in which a production comes into being, *Lear's Daughters* exemplifies the innovative strategies of the WTG, which emerged in the early 1970s as a women's street theatre 'performing for demonstrations and similar events' but 'did not formalise itself until 1974' (Itzin: 230). The WTG is distinctive for its more radical precepts, including the decision to 'avoid working in the hierarchical, competitive structures which characterise the male-dominated establishment theatre and media' (230), which effectively meant frequent attempts at deploying group writing strategies; the attention to feminist content and methodologies; the extensive use of improvisation; multi-racial casting; the support of younger writers through extensive and open-ended workshops of new work; the virtual exclusion of men; and the use of

alternative performance venues. In addition to *Pretty Ugly*, a show for youth about fashion, and *In Our Way*, an 'adult show exploring the effect of sex discrimination on women workers' (Wandor: 65), WTG has staged numerous new productions through the 1970s and 80s, all of which exhibit the kind of social conscience for which WTG is justly famous: *My Mkinga* (1980) deals with drug dumping in the Third World (Wandor: 66); *New Anatomies* (1981), by Timberlake Wertenbaker, focuses on how 'nineteenth-century women adventurers dressed as men' (Wandor: 67); and *Time Pieces* (1982) explores issues relating to women's history-making.

Lear's Daughters 'takes its shape from the "gaps" in Shakespeare's *King Lear*' (Griffin and Aston: 11) and does this, in Susan Bennett's words, to 'challenge the authority of Shakespeare, the cumulative power of mainstream production, and the operation of that authority in the politics of culture' (51). The play has been called a 'landmark in feminist "reinventing" of Shakespeare' (Goodman 1993b: 220) and Goodman suggests that the play questions 'all of history as presented in standard texts . . . [since history] may represent a genealogy of "false fathers"' (220). Shakespeare, in this reading, is aligned with conventional forms of history-making that require disruption, in this case through a discourse that undoes orthodox gender assumptions about the primacy of the male experience. In the play, the 'daughters' stories are re-told by the androgynous fool' (Griffin and Aston: 11), a comment on the way in which the authority of the narrator is traditionally understood. Furthermore, Griffin's and Aston's reading of the fool's function suggests that s/he 'details the fictions, myths, and structures which are deployed by men to imprison women in patriarchal ideology, to separate them from themselves, their bodies and their desires so that they are only ever daughters, wives, or mothers' (11–12).

The father's material absence from this scenario is one of the major ways in which the play rewrites Shakespeare's version of the story. The depth of characterization that Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia receive through the nurse's telling of 'fairy tales' (Griffin and Aston: 24) from their childhood, along with the focus they receive as staged characters, presents a radical alternative to the way in which audiences have come to expect the telling of Lear's story, with his pathetic request for his daughters to show which of them loves him most and its implicit assumption that it is the daughters' fault that Lear is driven to a tragic end.

Furthermore, as Goodman notes, in *Lear's Daughters* the 'princesses are carefully balanced against each other in terms of character and color' (1993b: 222). The first production, for instance, used a white woman for the role of Cordelia and two black women for the roles of Goneril and Regan, and the second used black women to play the roles of all three daughters, and white women to play the roles of the fool and the nanny. As a result of such casting choices, issues of ethnicity and class (servants are white in the latter inverted scheme of things, mistresses are black) complicate the story of the daughters. Moreover, in *Lear's Daughters*, the daughters gain identity not in relation to a particular patriarchal hierarchy, but rather, from the distinctive features with which they are identified: Cordelia with words, Regan with touch; Goneril with colour. Goodman notes that 'In the final image of *Lear's Daughters*, the crown is thrown into the air and caught by all three daughters at once. The shrinking spotlight highlights the black and white of hands on gold just before the final blackout' (1993b: 222–223). The vision of a potential solidarity and the symbolic empowerment associated with grasping the crown radically remake Shakespeare. Here, adaptation, even as it puts to the question the ideology of the Shakespearean source, asks us not to disregard the Shakespearean source text, nor even to judge it as flawed, inferior, or politically incorrect. Rather, *Lear's Daughters* asks us to consider narrative alternatives that disrupt the sedimentation of convention gathered round its source.

Select bibliography

Entries marked * are particularly accessible.

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