Summary of Peter Rudnytsky’s “‘The Dark and Viscous Place’: The Dread of the Vagina in ‘King Lear’”

In this critical article, Peter Rudnytsky argues that King Lear expresses deep undertones of identity formation and castration complex. He explains that Shakespeare’s plays are written from a masculine perspective and that they depict predominant conflicts of masculine identity. With that being said, he goes on to explain how masculine identity is portrayed throughout Lear. In doing so, he applies such complexes as Castration complex and psychoanalytic theory.

In describing gender identity, he uses the example of Lear admitting his grief to Goneril and how Cordelia’s deceit has brought a powerful man to tears: “Life and death I am asham’d/that thou hast power to shake my manhood thus/that these hot tears, which breake from me perforce/should make worth them (1.4.305-308). 25

He also goes on to explain how Lear giving up his crown was a form of surrendering to his feministic side; especially since he abandoned his crown to women. The fool even taunts him for becoming a feminized male: “Why, to put head in, not to give it away to his daughters, and leave his hornes without a case (1.5.30-32).

Peter also enables the reader to gain a better understanding of the Castration Complex when applied to Edmund. He explains how Edmund, being a bastard child, follows in the foot steps of his father and beds countless women for personal pleasure. Rudnytsky goes as far as to explain that Edmund is suffering from castration complex because he enjoys having two young women fight to the death (literally) over him. Edmund is “tainted by the ‘dark and vicious place’ from which he has sprung and to which he compulsively returns (Rudnytsky 304).

Rudnytsky closes the essay by explaining how much we can learn from analyzing literature in a psychoanalytic perspective. He believes that in doing so, we, as readers, will be able to look beneath the surface to see the underlying tones and fantasies that are inscribed within the discourse of the characters. closes the essay by explaining how much we can learn from analyzing literature in a psychoanalytic perspective. He believes that in doing so, we, as readers, will be able to look beneath the surface to see the underlying tones and fantasies that are inscribed within the discourse of the characters.