

Feminist Theory / *King Lear* study questions

1. Feminist Criticism assumes that oppression of women has been pervasive in literary production, and that the cultural generalizations we then make based on the gender stereotyping we see in literature are inherently damaging. Acting on these assumptions, it then seeks to examine instances of bias and prejudice in literature, but it also seeks examples of empowered, even enlightened gender depictions – all in an effort to expose the negative and/or positive effects of that bias in the literature *but also* in culture.

With this in mind, why might we view Shakespeare's characterizations of women here as either problematic or liberating?

2. Choose one of the position questions below to develop and explore further, using particular characters and textual examples to defend your conclusions:

Does the patriarchal ideology you see embedded in *King Lear* help to further stereotype, distort, ignore, or repress authentic female experience?

Or, are the three sisters actually resourceful, self-confident women who actually seek to create their own empowered spaces in order to achieve a kind of spirited self-determinism or independence?

3. The authorship of Shakespeare's collected works has been widely contested in recent history – some believe the plays may even have been written by Queen Elizabeth herself, the reigning monarch when all of these plays were written.

Does it change your perception of the play, and of its female characters in particular, if you believe that *Lear* is written by a woman?

Or, put another way, can you imagine how the story of *King Lear* might look – and how it might change – if the person(s) who wrote it – man *or* woman – chose not to adhere to conventional, culturally inscribed rules of the patriarchal order as he or she formulated the characters, events, plots and subplots, speech patterns, symbols and metaphors, and gender stereotypes within the work?

4. Using the question sets below to guide your thinking, characterize the women in *King Lear*, using certain scenes from the play to defend your selection.

Do you see the sisters falling into that of an archetypal "Mary" figure (the virgin saint-mother, the innocent paragon of virtue, the nurturer and defender of purity)?

Or perhaps instead an "Eve" archetype (the evil seductress, the conniving bitch, the manipulator, the reason for Man's fall into temptation and animal desire)?

Or do they transgress these reductive stereotypes and become something else that is much more complex and no longer defined by simple good/bad binary descriptions of intent and behavior?