

King Lear — Feminist Critique Discussion Questions

GENERAL QUESTIONS:

- ✓ What role does sex and gender play in the work?
- ✓ What systems of meaning hold this work together? That is, what kinds of binary dualisms structure this work, and which ones seem privileged or favored? Why do you think that is?
- ✓ What image(s) of woman is conveyed in the work, how are the female characters in the work portrayed or depicted? Do you see any patterns to these characterizations?
- ✓ In what ways do the writer's depictions of women either undermine or reinforce certain cultural beliefs and stereotypes that we already hold about women? What are those beliefs and stereotypes?
- ✓ Why might the writer have chosen to portray female characters in the ways that she/he does? How do these depictions "serve" the work, or not?
- ✓ Who holds the power in the work? Why do you think that? What has that character(s) had to do in order to capture and maintain power, however that's defined in the work?
- ✓ How do certain language patterns or characters function to delimit our knowledge and understanding of gender roles in the work?
- ✓ What, or who, is left out in this work? What's not being said about, or to, women? Why?
- ✓ Are women being excluded, suppressed, or exploited in the work? In what ways?

SHAKESPEARE-SPECIFIC QUESTIONS:

- ✓ How is female experience portrayed in *King Lear*?
- ✓ Do the sisters always play the object to the men's "subject" here—are they only the passive receptors of what's doled out to them by the kings and dukes and brothers in their lives? Are women portrayed as the weaker sex here yet again? What does that mean? What specific language leads you to take a position one way or the other?
- ✓ Feminist Criticism maintains that canonical literature consistently tends to reassert woman as second or other, as the passive object to man's more active and powerful subject. Do you see these patterns repeated in *King Lear*, or do you see them being challenged and somehow undermined (implicitly or explicitly) in the structure and the language of the play?
- ✓ Does the patriarchal ideology embedded in this story help to stereotype, distort, ignore, or repress authentic female experience? Or, are the sisters resourceful, self-confident women who actually create their own space and achieve a kind of spirited, genuine self-determinism or independence?
- ✓ Are the sisters in fact more resourceful, intelligent, savvy, strategic than their male counterparts in Albany, Cornwall, and Edmund?
- ✓ How is what women feel, think and act misrepresented or misinterpreted in the play?
- ✓ How exactly is the sisters' freedom to determine their own identities (as separate from that of their husbands) limited in the play?
- ✓ Do the sisters successfully contest or challenge male authority and autonomy throughout the story?
- ✓ Is *King Lear* actually, in its own way, sympathetic to feminist concerns, genuinely alert to and aware of "female experience," and somehow actively subversive of the male dominance it spends so much time criticizing and tearing down in the action of the play (think here about how many of the men lose their access to power and control in the story)?
- ✓ Is Shakespeare, in this play, merely supporting standard patriarchal practices? Does he seem to be reaffirming male dominance and woman's subjugation to the laws of men?

- ✓ Is Shakespeare attacking, defending or merely describing patriarchy?
- ✓ Do you see evidence of actively misogynistic language or characterizations here? Where? Why do you think it's there—how does it serve the play, or reveal something about his characters or about Shakespeare himself?
- ✓ Is Shakespeare making any kind of specific, implicit statements or value judgments about the role of women in society? About the roles of women in family units?
- ✓ How do Shakespeare's portrayals of Goneril and Regan reinforce conventional ideas we have about marriage, and about father/daughter relationships?
- ✓ Are Goneril & Regan forced to adopt "masculine" identities in order to survive for most of the play? What makes you think so? What exactly is a "masculine identity" in the context of this play?
- ✓ Has the evolving chaos of the play come about simply because the sisters have overstepped or somehow abused their power and authority, with order only restored once men retake the reigns of power? Does this mean that Shakespeare is telling us they shouldn't have been "allowed" to take power to begin with, simply because they're women?
- ✓ What do you make of the fact that all three sisters die – two murdered, one by suicide – at the end of the play? How does the play's outcome correspond to the choices they've made throughout the story?
- ✓ Feminist Criticism assumes that oppression of women is pervasive throughout the history of literary production, and that generalizations based on gender stereotyping are inherently hurtful at best. Acting on these assumptions, it then seeks to examine instances of bias and prejudice in literature, and then tries to expose the various negative 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 problematic, or not?
- ✓ King Lear appears to honor and value his daughters at the outset of the play, but what is the basis of his flattery? What does he really seem to value in them? What do they represent for him? Do you think this representation is a fair one to the sisters? Why?
- ✓ Why do you think Shakespeare portrays the sisters as greedy and conniving instead of good and benevolent leaders? Are they ultimately "punished" for having been corrupted by power and plotting against Lear, Gloucester, and Albany in turn?
- ✓ Does Cordelia overturn or somehow move against conventional stereotypes we have about women who attempt to assume the reigns of power, or about women who emphatically turn away from power, risking their own safety and security within a patriarchal setting? Is Cordelia ultimately "punished" for having transgressed her prescribed role relative to the men?
- ✓ It is often assumed that this play is more about King Lear than anyone else, but is there enough evidence to argue that the play is instead more about the women – the sisters – than it is about him? Why might that be the case? Does the ending of the play complicate your conclusions at all?
- ✓ Although some academics will argue that Shakespeare's collected works are actually written by a woman – Queen Elizabeth, in fact – and not the historical figure we've come to know as "Shakespeare," most scholars of the Early Modern Period will say that either a single male playwright named Shakespeare, or a larger group of actors and printers associated with him and working collectively to record, after the fact, his plays which he himself did not actually publish, wrote his collected works.

With this discussion of contested authorship in mind, does it change your perception of the play, and of its female characters in particular, knowing that a man (or men) probably wrote the story? Why?
- ✓ Do you see the sisters falling into paradigmatic role of "the Mary figure" (the virgin saint-mother, the pure and innocent paragon of virtue)? Or "the Eve figure" (the evil seductress, the monster woman, the reason for Man's fall into temptation and animal desire)? Or do they transgress those reductive stereotypes and become something else not defined by simple good/bad binary descriptions of intent and behavior?