

As I haven't had a chance yet to formally introduce the play or the theory we'll be focusing on for our next and final unit in the course, I've prepared this quick primer sheet to give you a sense of what to begin looking for as you watch the film adaptation of the play. Read it carefully and keep it nearby as you watch so that you can take notes on related questions and observations as they arise.

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**King Lear** is one of the last plays William Shakespeare wrote, and one of his most famous tragedies. He adapted it from a well-known folk tale of the time, so it's not actually a very complicated story.

Here's the basic plot: a king decides to step down from his throne and divide his kingdom equally between his three daughters, each of whom must pass a "love test" in order to get access to his riches. (It is important to note here that his daughters can't actually take possession of the kingdom themselves – they have to do it through their husbands because women couldn't own property at the time Shakespeare wrote in England, even though the supreme monarch of the time was Queen Elizabeth, a woman.) Lear's love test requires each daughter to profess her undying love for him. Two daughters play along (the bad ones, Regan and Goneril), the third doesn't and so she gets cast out of the kingdom by her father as a result (her name is Cordelia, the good one and his favorite of the three). So this sets up a classic Shakespearean power struggle between Lear's bad daughters and their diminished King-father for control of the kingdom, its soldiers and riches. This power struggle defines the rest of the play, with predictably tragic outcomes for almost everyone involved.

There is a secondary story here that mirrors the first one (this story-within-a-story structure is a common Shakespearean convention). King Lear has a trusted court lieutenant, an old fellow named Gloucester, who has two sons of his own – one good (Edgar), the other bad (Edmund). In a parallel story to that of Lear's, the good son goes into exile while the bad one stays behind and attempts to disable his own father and grab power from him, just like Lear's two daughters are doing from theirs. Edmund "the bastard son" joins forces with Lear's daughters to consolidate control of Lear's kingdom and Gloucester's riches. Eventually the daughters turn against one another and vie for the amorous attentions of the bad son to help each gain control of the kingdom (even though both of them are already married).

While Lear's daughters are busy fighting their father and each other for control, there are a number of secondary characters (Kent, the king's advisor, and Fool, his court clown, and Edgar, Gloucester's good son in disguise, along with a few others) all out there running about trying to save Lear and Gloucester, each of whom has chosen to wander off into the woods, descending slowly into madness as each is slowly betrayed and stripped of power by his own children.

That's it. A power struggle between brothers and sisters, two crazy dads detached from the whole business, and no queens anywhere in sight. The close of the story brings everyone (everyone who is still alive, anyway) back together for a final battle that restores a semblance of order and balance and hope to a broken kingdom littered with the bodies of family pitted against family – which is why this is called a tragedy.

All of the regular themes are here, particularly those revolving around issues of familial loyalty, greed, power and revenge – recurrent themes in *all* of Shakespeare's plays – and the extent to which we damage each other and the natural laws of the universe in our quest to get what we want even when that involves hurting or destroying those dearest to us – our sisters and brothers, sons and daughters, mothers and fathers. In this sense *King Lear* becomes, like all of Shakespeare's works, a meditation on certain aspects of the human condition, on what makes us so uniquely and tragically human.

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**Feminist Criticism** assumes that oppression of women is pervasive throughout the history of literature, and that the generalizations we all make based on various cultural gender stereotypes are inherently problematic, particularly to women. It seeks to examine instances of bias and prejudice in literature (these are often referred to as *misogyny* and *sexism*), and tries to expose the various negative effects of that bias in literature and in culture.

Feminist theory, the last body of literary criticism we'll work with this term, borrows much of its methodology from deconstruction and applies this in specific contexts that concern how gender roles – the power dynamics between men and women, and the roles those force us each to play – are depicted in culture and in literature. It wishes to examine, among other things:

- *how* women and men are (or are not) represented in a given work of literature
- *how* and *why* certain gender stereotypes, archetypes, paradigms are either “written into” our stories or undermined by them
- *what effect it has* on a culture when an author or character does or doesn't bend to the conventional rules of patriarchy (“rules” like destructive gender definitions, or ingrained sexist beliefs)

Feminist theory sees the different modes of literary production (stories, poems, songs, plays) as “sites” upon which we project certain problematic cultural paradigms of what it is to be a woman or a man. It also sees literary works generally as the places from which both destructive *and* liberating ideas of sex and gender originate. Our literary works help “create” us, but they also reflect us.

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So. Viewing a play like ***King Lear through the lens of feminist criticism*** can be a useful way of understanding what some of the conceptions and expectations were that people had of women and men in Elizabethan England, and how an artist like Shakespeare chose to recapitulate – or not – those paradigms in his plays. This kind of study provides an opportunity for us to understand how we as a culture, then and now, define and delimit *gender roles* – the things we say women and men are allowed to do, and the ways in which we enforce or undermine those rules.

Below, then, are some questions you must begin asking of *King Lear* as you watch it. Take notes as you watch. Your answers to these questions will help you with your feminist theory work for the rest of the term and prepare you for our classroom discussion and essay work following the viewing of the play.

- *How are King Lear's daughters portrayed by Shakespeare in this play? Do you see any patterns to his characterizations? What image(s) of woman is conveyed in the work as a whole? Does it change?*
- *Why might Shakespeare have chosen to portray his female characters in the ways that he does? How do these depictions “serve” the story, or not?*
- *In what ways do his depictions of women either undermine or reinforce cultural beliefs and stereotypes that we already hold about women in western societies? What are those beliefs and stereotypes?*
- *What kinds of binary dualisms do you see enacted in the play, and which ones seem privileged or favored? Why do you think that is?*
- Feminist Theory spends a lot of time examining who is powerful (often men) and who is correspondingly weak or passive (usually women) in works of great literature.

*Who holds the power in the story? Does these power centers shift as the play progresses? Where, and why do you think that?*

*What does each character(s) have to do in order to capture and maintain that power? Are women being excluded, suppressed, or exploited in their quest for power and agency in this play, or are they taking on their own forms of power instead, and at what price?*

- *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 events in the play lead you to take a position one way or the other?*
- *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?*
- *Is Shakespeare making any kind of specific, implicit statements or value judgments about the role of women in society? About the role of women in family units? How do his portrayals of the two evil sisters reinforce conventional ideas we have about marriage, and about father/daughter relationships?*