

# The role of gender in shakespeares king lear



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The famous tragedy, King Lear, was written by William Shakespeare between 1603 and 1606 and later revised. [Originally titled The True Chronicle of the History of Life and Death of King Lear and His Three Daughters and later The Tragedy of King Lear, which was a more theatrical version, many modern editors shorten the title, though most insist that each version has its individual integrity that should be preserved.

] Lear's daughters, Goneril, Regan and Cordelia, are three of the main characters in the play. The daughters are all treated differently, as Goneril and Regan flattered their father in elaborate terms, Lear's youngest daughter Cordelia was straight forward and honest, though she felt she did not need to express her love for him in elaborate ways in public, and because of her silence, she was banished from the kingdom. ] The mistreatment of women in general by all of the men in the play, but mainly by the king himself, is evident throughout King Lear, with the description of them being "promiscuous and disloyal," and thus their role in the play was very miniscule. Cordelia is the exception to the promiscuous and disloyal stereotype, as she is portrayed as being a more ideal daughter, by the standards set by Shakespearean times, though according to the King, Cordelia is the most despicable of the three daughters.

Although Cordelia was not shown much in play, she is definitely one of the major characters. By refusing to publicly flatter her father, Cordelia initiated the entire tragedy. Though Lear says that Cordelia was his favorite daughter, "I loved her most, and thought to set my rest on her kind nursery" (1, i, 122). Cordelia thought that her love was expressed better quietly and did not need to express her love outwardly, as she says, "I love your Majesty

according to my bond; no more no less" (1, i, 91), thus showing that as a woman, she was rational and sensible. Cordelia represents what the standard woman of the Shakespearean times would be, being polite, delicate and innocent, and as such, she was considered the perfect woman and perfect daughter with her solid morals and values. She says of herself, " So young, my lord, and true," (1, i, 108) as she explains to her father that, unlike her sisters, she will not lie and say that she only loves her father, for she is saving her love for her husband, should she ever be married.

She was shown as a gentle, kind-hearted, selfless person as well as willing to perform any duty for her father. Her death is considered by some the real tragedy of the play. A pure character such as Cordelia did not deserve death and the shock of her death led to her father's death, which marked the end of the play. Cordelia resembled her father in many aspects, such as her dignity, her loyalty and her courage and at times, her stubbornness. Her honesty is most clearly seen when Cordelia says " It is no vicious blot, murder, or foulness, no unchaste action or dishonored step that hath deprived me of your grave and favor, but even for want of that for which I am richer: A still solíciting eye and such a tongue As I am glad I have not, though not to have it hath lost me in your liking.

(1, i, 234-240) Cordelia is trying to tell her father that she has not committed any crimes by not publicly confessing her love to her father, but that if he chooses to see it that way, then she is not going to waste her breath trying to convince him that she loves him. Of the three main women in King Lear, Cordelia represented the society of women yet she was strong and in control at the same time, and this is evident when she calls off the French attack on

England as quickly as she initiated it. All of the wonderful characteristics that Cordelia possess make her the ideal woman in the play, being respectful and dignified but still powerful. Cordelia's honesty and dignity contrast greatly with the hypocrisy of her sisters.

Goneril and Regan, King Lear's eldest daughters possessed traits that were foul and unpleasant. After King Lear banishes Cordelia from his kingdom, he divides it between his oldest two daughters. Through the duration of the play, the two daughters misused their power and continuously devised malicious plans against their father. Shakespearean women were considered to be quiet, shy and submissive, which is the complete opposite of the two oldest daughters of King Lear.

They were vicious and aggressive and these traits bring out the male characteristics in them, which in turn makes them the ideal villain. Being adulterous, Goneril displays a stronger male characteristic, telling a man other than her husband that he is a wonderful man and deserves her more than her own husband. (4, ii, 29) Goneril was shown as being the more cunning of the two daughters, as this is shown with by her sneakily talking about her husband behind his back, saying of him, " it is the cowardly terror of his spirit that dares not undertake, (4, ii, 13-14)" though as the play proceeds, Regan becomes just as vicious. Shakespeare uses the two daughters as representation of the unnaturalness of filial ingratitude. Lear even goes as far to compare his unruly daughters to animals, calling them, " Tigers, not daughters" (4, ii, 40). These women are personified as being evil in the play, and are portrayed as being greedy and ungrateful.

Both of King Lear's eldest daughters express a deep interest in Edmund, the son of the Earl of Gloucester, though by doing this they are betraying each other, as well as Goneril betraying her husband, thus further showing the more masculine traits that they two eldest sisters both possess. The entire play consists of the two sisters fighting over this man, though their attempts to getting what they both want eventually backfired on them and they ultimately destroyed each other. Like Cordelia, both of the sisters possess many of the same traits as their father, though they are different traits. They are over-confident and both have fierce tempers that backfired on them. The two sisters act as a link between the sub-plot and the main plot as they both are involved with a secret affair with Edmund.

In this play, King Lear is a perfect example of neglectful parenting, and there is no sign of motherly nurture which indirectly suggests a difficult childhood for the three sisters. Coppelia Kahn, feminist and psychoanalytical critic, reads Shakespeare's deliberate use of the "absent mother" as a means of seeing King Lear as a tragedy of masculinity. Lear's progress is not towards spiritual redemption, but towards a recognition and acceptance of "the woman in himself." The 'tragedy' in the play reflects awareness of the terrible human price paid by a society that represses female instincts and feelings.

Regan and Goneril betray and disappoint Lear by not being mothers to him- what some would see as a behavior resulting from their "masculine instincts". This links with Lear's choice to make Cordelia his mother figure in Act 1, "I loved her most, and thought to set my rest on her kind nursery." (1, i, 124-125) Cordelia is the person Lear had chosen to spend his

retirement from the throne with, and her refusal to comply with the love-test initiated chaos in the play. Being the only one of Lear's daughters who actually loves him, Cordelia refuses to profess blinding love for her father, instead offering only that which is true. This play takes on a strongly feministic perspective, as much of the play is spent trying to highlight on the promiscuous and disloyal ways of Lear's eldest two daughters, while showing the contrast of the youngest daughter as being pure and loyal. These three women are the only female characters in the play; their mother is never mentioned nor is any other woman. Though there is no mention of their mother in the play, the three daughters are independent and strong, which shows the real nature of women in Shakespearean times.

With little guidance, the sisters manage to pursue their desires, despite living in a society which is predominantly male-dominated. It was widely thought that women in this era were incapable of running a kingdom but this tragedy shows women to be wise and cunning and more than capable of handling power. Although the eldest sisters of King Lear prove to misuse their power, they are still depicted to be commanding and overruling, whereas Cordelia shows some characteristics of the typical delicate Shakespearean woman, though she is still strong and noble. Each of the three women in King Lear plays a major role.

The youngest daughter, being pure and devoted, starts off the entire tragedy, as well as finishes it. The two oldest daughters, being ruthless and malicious, bring out the actual story within the play with their continuous mistreatment of their father. The women in King Lear play a highly important role as they show the true nature of women, though the difference between <https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-gender-in-shakespeares-king-lear/>

how women were perceived by the behavior portrayed by Regan and Goneril contrasted with how women were supposed to be, as displayed by Cordelia.