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Feminism and How it Affects Us

In modern times, the feminist movement has been present and active. Although some individuals may choose to believe that feminism is the belief that females are superior to males, the actual meaning of the feminist movement is the advocacy of women's rights on the basis of the equality of the sexes. This act of advocacy for women can be seen throughout the play *King Lear* by William Shakespeare, as there are a great deal of characters who all interact in different ways depending on where they stand on social situations and political alignments. In the book, *The Sociology of Gender: a Brief Introduction*, author Laura Kramer states that a people’s culture has a great affect on the way that their lives are lived. “The culture of a people is their established beliefs and practices. It serves as a design for living, transmitted from one generation to the next and usually slow to change...culture influences individual choices, if only because one anticipates having to cope with the reactions of others.” (Kramer, 22). The certain way that a group of individuals live has a specific impact on gender roles and on the way things work in a society. In Shakespearean times, the way of the world was to have women be caretakers and men be protectors. In Shakespeare’s play, *King Lear,* there are certain female characters that act to defy the set status quo. These characters are advocates for themselves and for others in the play.

When filtering through the play and searching for specific events and actions that show a portrayal of advocacy for the early feminist movement, a few characters stand out from the rest. Cordelia is the youngest daughter of King Lear and is a strong female character that does not want to play along with the games of the patriarchy, giving her the qualities of being a feminist. Her being an advocate for the other women in her life place her well ahead of her time, becoming a Shakespearean suffragette. Edmund is the character chosen that best represents the gender roles and expectations of males in Shakespearean times. Following this model of a strong male presence, readers are able to accurately depict how gender can influence society. This relation with gender, societal roles, and expectations is relevant to today’s society still with similar qualities seen as “traditional”.

Cordelia is not seen much throughout the play, as she was exiled early in the play by her father for not participating in his childish game which was his means of distributing land amongst his daughters. Due to the fact Cordelia is a female; she cannot legally own land that would be bequeathed upon her from her father, King Lear. Cordelia is a strong, independent character that doesn't conform to the role of the “ideal princess” that Lear wants her to be. When Cordelia is exiled, she receives no inheritance and her fiancé, Burgundy, refuses to marry her because in his eyes, she has no worth, for a woman’s worth in this time was measured by land or dowry. In response to Burgundy, Cordelia says, “Peace with Burgundy. Since that respects and fortunes are his love, I shall not be his wife,” (Act 1 Scene 1 Line 249-251). Cordelia’s response to Burgundy reflects that she is not worried about marriage and fortune, but wants to find someone who loves her instead of her status as a princess. However, because of her resistance to her father’s obscene behavior and her constant virtue, the King of France marries her.

As it is in Shakespearean plays, the heroes all perish due to an untimely death. Cordelia is one of the first to die at the close of the play, and her death could mean something else, as Harold Bloom explains in his book; “Shakespeare himself rescues a ‘threatened masculinity’ by murdering Cordelia.” (Bloom, 496). This “threatened masculinity” is felt by Edmund as the women in the play display qualities of leadership, basically challenging his authority as a man. The deaths of these female characters could symbolize the end of a feminist movement that was only just beginning. After the three daughters of King Lear pass away, it is revealed that Cordelia has always been the most loved daughter of the king because after it all, she was the sole daughter who showed true compassion and love to her father. However, King Lear fails to realize that the very qualities he admired in Cordelia caused the tragedy in the first place. This is reflected in Lear’s last line; “Her voice was ever soft. Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman.” (Act 5 Scene 3 Line 280-281). Lear fails to recognize the bravery and heroism that his youngest daughter displayed, showing that a woman will still be belittled even after saving a life, for swallowing one’s pride is deemed a task only suitable for women. Lear’s admiration of the gentle qualities that should be shown by women runs counter to what he wanted to hear at the beginning; for he was won by the extravagant gestures of Goneril and Regan, despite their lack of sincerity. When Cordelia passes at the close of the tragic play, it is shown by King Lear that she was truly the most loved and respected of the three sisters, for a father simply cannot live without his daughter.

In the work *King Lear,* Edmund is not only a victim of his own greed, but also an instigator of toxic masculinity that ultimately leads to his death. In author Harold Bloom’s book, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, he declares that Edmund is the perfect villain. Bloom states; “The play’s great villain, the superb and uncanny Edmund, is ice-cold, indifferent to Lear as he is even to his own father Gloucester, his half brother Edgar, and his lovers Goneril and Regan. It is part of Shakespeare’s genius not to have Edmund and Lear address even a single word to each other in the entire play, because they are the apocalyptic antithesis: the king is all feeling, and Edmund is bare of all affect.” (Bloom, 479). Edmund is treacherous not only to the royal family, but even to his own brother and father, and it is when he betrays Edgar and Gloucester that he rises to power as a strong, masculine character. Edmund is beloved by the eldest daughters of Lear for his power and attractiveness. But his flawed position in society and his sudden rise in power quickly corrupts him. When he is displaying his strength and bragging about his conquests of both the eldest sisters, he shows no respect for women. It seems that his only use for females is in using them as a tool to gain even more power and to achieve his goals. Throughout the play, Edmund becomes more of a villain and more corrupt with every act of defiance against his placement in society. However, at the very end when he sees both Regan and Goneril’s bodies brought out after they fought over him, he shows guilt and a realization at the dramatic fatalities he has caused and states, “Yet Edmund was beloved,” despite his actions and motives (act 5, scene 3, line 248). Edmund was a strong male presence through the course of the play, and he believed that he was the only powerful being in the land. Little did he know, the sisters, Goneril and Regan, were using him as much as he was using them. This subtle display of power by the elder daughters of Lear is seen as conniving, but this manipulation of a man was one of the only ways a woman was able to gain power in a patriarchal monarchy. If Goneril and Regan never tried to seduce Edmund, their part in this play would have been very small. Because of their collaborative conspiracy, the women of the royal family were able to advance through the ranks.

Love is abundant in *King Lear*. It is shown by the daughters of the king, it is shown by the fool towards the king, and it is shown from the sons of Gloucester. But, as Samuel Johnson once remarked, “Love...is the wisdom of fools and the folly of the wise.” (Bloom, 483). Love is a very complex emotion, and is often misinterpreted falsely. It can also bring jealousy from those that think their love is not equivalent or fair. When Cordelia refuses to admit love to King Lear, he is outraged and banishes his prized daughter. These misinterpretations of a pure emotion ultimately lead to a great tragedy; much like the ending of Hamlet with poisons, duels and several main characters perishing. This ultimately shows that greed on a large scale can lead to peril for anyone involved. This is seen as characters not directly involved in Edmund’s plot are exposed to the tragedies that will follow. Love is also seen differently for each gender; for the daughters seek the love and appreciation of their father in order to acquire wealth and land, and the sons seek acceptance and praise from their father. The love felt by the two eldest daughters of Lear are false and are mistaken as genuine. Men in the play, such as Edmund and Burgundy, seek companionship with a female to acquire land or wealth. The “love” shown by the more devious characters is more often than not a malicious tactic performed by the greedy. It is interesting to see the role that love can play in a work such as *King Lear*. There are many inner moving parts within the story and throughout the characters, and it is important to understand what is false versus what is truly genuine, for the true motive of a person is found through how they interact with other individuals.

*King Lear* by William Shakespeare is a literary masterpiece, and gives incredible insight on what an early feminist movement might have looked like. In the book *Voices of Feminism: Past, Present and Future*, author JoAnn Guernsey describes the modern feminist movement being aggressive, and at times, violent. This statement given by Guernsey shows just how much feminism has changed through the ages. In *King Lear,* the females are working towards their rights quietly and tend to keep their plans on how to change the way things work to themselves. This take on feminism is in stark contrast to today. Looking at recent times, the Women’s March in capitals across the world is a blatant display of advocacy for women’s rights. Having protests to defend a gender in Shakespearean times is simply unheard of, for they believed that a woman should be seen, and not heard. Feminism is an ever-evolving movement, and it will continue to grow until every person on Earth believes that women are entirely equal to men. And having that said, the movement might never end, for gender injustices are deeply rooted in the traditions of the world.

[Rubric](https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B6fugCwVMgP_Yjg5ZGRjMzEtMDIxYS00MmE5LWJkZDktOWI4NmU3ODg3NWZl/edit)

*Works Cited*

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Guernsey, JoAnn Bren. *Voices of Feminism.* Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, 1996. Print.

Kramer, Laura. *The Sociology of Gender: A Brief Introduction*. Third ed., New York, Oxford University Press, Inc., 2011. Print.

Shakespeare, William. *No Fear Shakespeare: King Lear*. New York, Spark Publishing, 2003. Print.

**Pre-Write**

* Cite at least three critical sources in addition to King Lear / Macbeth and Foster. These may not include any quote sites, or student support sites but must be from actual documents you research, read, and use.

## *The Sociology of Gender: a Brief Introduction* - Laura Kramer

* + - “The culture of a people is their established beliefs and practices. It serves as a design for living, transmitted from one generation to the next and usually slow to change...culture influences individual choices, if only because one anticipates having to cope with the reactions of others.” (Kramer, 22)
    - “‘Intimate terrorism’ is motivated by the desire for control, rather than by a particular issue...Other types of intimate violence [include] ‘mutual violent control’, in which both partners are attempting to gain control in the relationship through the use of intimate terrorism.” (Kramer, 103)
  + *Shakespeare: the Invention of the Human* - Harold Bloom
    - “*King Lear* and *Hamlet*...announce the the beginning and the end of human nature and destiny.” (Bloom, 476)
    - “Lear’s torments are central to us, almost to all of us, since the sorrows of generational strife are necessarily universal.” (Bloom, 477)
    - “The play’s great villain, the superb and uncanny Edmund, is ice-cold, indifferent to Lear as he is even to his own father Gloucester, his half brother Edgar, and his lovers Goneril and Regan. It is part of Shakespeare’s genius not to have Edmund and Lear address even a single word to each other in the entire play, because they are the apocalyptic antithesis: the king is all feeling, and Edmund is bare of all affect.” (Bloom, 479)
    - “Love, Samuel Johnson once remarked, is the wisdom of fools and the folly of the wise.” (Bloom, 483)
    - “Love is no healer in *The Tragedy of King Lear*, indeed, it starts all of the trouble, and is a tragedy in itself.” (Bloom 484)
    - “Janet Adelman (in her *Suffocating Mothers*, 1992) goes so far as to say that Shakespeare himself rescues a ‘threatened masculinity’ by murdering Cordelia.” (Bloom, 496)
  + *Voices of Feminism: Past, Present and Future* - JoAnn Bren. Guernsey

Main Ideas: Gender roles through the ages, Shakespearean portrayal of, and satire against gender roles

and differences in society.

* Edmund as a character: Who Have I Been?; Who Am I Now?; and Who Will I Become?
  + Edmund was a man who was not well known, he was lowly and did not have much social standing. As an illegitimate son who was reminded of such often, he was inferior to his brother Edgar.
  + He became power hungry and began to build his false empire, he is persuaded by one of King Lear’s daughters. He pushes away his family and what he previously knew in order to reinvent himself.
  + His power drives him mad, he challenges his former brother. His mad dash for power ends in death for him and for all who he previously cared about. Edmund was the cause for destruction.

Cordelia as a character: Who Have I Been?; Who Am I Now?; and Who Will I Become?

* In the beginning Cordelia is King Lear’s favorite daughter because she is the youngest and fairest.
* When Cordelia refuses to play the “I love you” game for her father’s land she is considered worthless by her father. Exiled from the land and she is married the king of France, because of her virtues he witnessed during the land distribution.
* In the end, King Lear realizes that Cordelia is the only daughter who truly loved him. She and her sisters are all casualties, Lear loses all that he held dear because he decided to test loyalty.
* “Her voice was ever soft. Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman” Lear on Cordelia’s demeanor.