

Shakespeare highlights Cordelia's understanding of true love. Many readings of Cordelia's character have suggested that she is like a Christ-like figure – her words 'O dear father, it is thy business I go about' echo Christ's in Luke 49.

In the reunion of Lear and Cordelia, we still see her honouring and respecting her father. She calls him 'dear father' and 'with medicine on her lips' is prepared to 'repair those violent harms (her) two sisters' caused him. Shakespeare uses gentle and loving language to emphasise that Cordelia is 'the living emblem of womanly dignity'. One could argue that Cordelia represents women's power: it is as if Lear has been saved by being reunited with his daughter and so falls asleep in peace. The power is reiterated in the Quarto version of the play, where music is played during Cordelia's lines to show its healing properties.

In contrast, Gonerill and Regan are much less psychologically complex than most Shakespearean characters of comparable importance. Few of their lines carry hints of motivations other than cruelty, lust or ambition, characteristics of the image of woman as an enemy. One could argue that Shakespeare deliberately avoids giving them humanising scruples to present them as women who are inherently flawed and deficient in reason and morality. He doesn't allow them to point out wrongs done to them in the past or to question the fairness of their society's distribution of power.

The two sisters are first seen being dishonest in the 'love test'. Gonerill states that she loves her father 'more than eyesight, space and liberty' and 'as much as child ever loved'. Regan's response emphasises the value of her love; she should be priced at Gonerill's 'worth'. Their language is clearly filled with hyperbole. The exaggeration of their supposed love seems unnatural and fake, thus the sisters represent the misleading and awry women in Shakespearean society. It can be said that Shakespeare was implying that women, although regarded by many to be unequal to men, still lust for equality and hope to obtain it no matter by what means. Here, the love test is an opportunity for Gonerill and Regan to gain power.

Furthermore, the gender inversion of Regan and Gonerill is very persistent throughout 'King Lear'. Gonerill openly criticizes Albany after he talks of his love for her. She challenges his strength as ruler by pointing out his 'milky gentleness' and that he is more 'ataxed for want of wisdom'. This lack of respect is certainly surprising for a 17th century reader, as the general belief would be that a woman serves her husband. Therefore Shakespeare portrays Gonerill as a Machiavellian character who goes against the natural order of things.