

## FEMINIST CRITICISM

Feminist criticism of Lear incorporates a similar range of contrasting views. For Coppelia Kahn *King Lear* is a play about 'male anxiety'. Kahn suggests that Lear breaks down when he refuses to accept that he is dependent on his daughters, that he needs the feminine. Lear goes mad because he cannot face his feminine side; he refuses to cry. When Lear learns to weep, and rediscovers a loving non-patriarchal relationship with Cordelia, he is redeemed. In Kahn's view the play affirms femininity as a positive force.

Kathleen McLuskie's reading of *King Lear* asserts the opposite view. For her, Lear is an 'anti-feminine' play. She suggests 'the misogyny of King Lear, both the play and its hero, is constructed out of an ascetic tradition which presents women as the source of the primal sin of lust, combining with concerns about the threat to the family posed by female insubordination'. Her arguments are based on her recognition that the 'action of the play, the organisation of its points of view and the theatrical dynamic of its central scenes all depend upon an audience accepting an equation between "human nature" and "male power"'. McLuskie points out that the play forces us to sympathise with the patriarchs, Lear and Gloucester, and the masculine power structure they represent. She does not feel that Shakespeare presents a movement towards the feminine in *King Lear*, rather the reverse. 'Family relations in this play are seen as fixed and determined, and any movement within them is portrayed as a destructive reversal of the rightful order'. For McLuskie 'Cordelia's saving love, so much admired by critics, works ... less as a redemption of womankind than as an example of patriarchy restored'. The audience is forced to agree that evil women (Gonerill and Regan) create a chaotic world, and must be resisted. The feminine must either be made to submit (Cordelia) or destroyed (Gonerill and Regan).

To explore these diverse ideas further it is best to consider your own response to the play and then return to the critics themselves in full. You will find some of the critics mentioned here in the books listed in Further Reading.

## PART SEVEN

## BROADER PERSPECTIVES

## FURTHER READING

## THE TEXT AND ITS SOURCES

G.K. Hunter, ed., *King Lear*, The New Penguin Shakespeare, Penguin Books, 1972

This is the edition of the text used in the preparation of these Notes. It includes full comments on the text itself, helpful notes on the Quarto and Folio texts of *King Lear* and an interesting discussion of the play in the introduction

Kenneth Muir, ed., *King Lear*, The Arden Shakespeare, Methuen, 1959

The Arden edition of *King Lear* includes extensive annotations, extracts from sources used by Shakespeare in the appendices and a fine and comprehensive introduction to the play

Gary Taylor and Stanley Wells, eds, *The Complete Works*, Clarendon Press, 1986

The Quarto and Folio texts of *King Lear* are printed separately and the editors provide a detailed discussion of their histories. There is also a compact edition of *The Complete Works*, published in 1988

Kenneth Muir, *King Lear: Penguin Critical Studies*, Penguin Books, 1986

For a full discussion of Shakespeare's sources for *King Lear*, the section called 'The Making of the Play' is excellent

## CRITICISM

This list represents only a very small tip of an enormous critical iceberg. Collections of criticism are very useful since they provide a range of views of the play. Some of the best recent collections include:

Frank Kermode, ed., *King Lear: A Casebook*, Macmillan, 1969

This collection covers a range of criticism of *King Lear* up to the 1960s, including the views of some of the play's early critics