In *King Lear* for example, the narrative and its dramatisation present a connection between sexual insubordination and anarchy, and the connection is given an explicitly misogynist emphasis.

The representation of patriarchal misogynist is most obvious in the treatment of Goneril and Regan. In the chronicle play *King Lear*, the sister’s villainy is much more evidently a function of the plot.

The close links between misogyny and patriarchal define the women in the play more precisely. In Shakespeare’s text however, the spectacle of suffering obliterates the past action so that the audience with Cordelia will murmur ‘No cause, no cause’. Rather than a resolution of the action, their reunion becomes an emblem of possible harmony, briefly glimpsed before the tragic debacle.

The women, however, act as disrupters of that order: Goneril attempts to deny the outcome of the tourney, grappling in an unseemly quarrel with Albany (V.iii.156-8) and their ugly deaths interrupt Edger’s efforts to close off the narrative with a formal account of his part in the story and Gloucester’s death.

Thus the deaths of Lear and Cordelia are contrasted with and seem almost a result of the destructiveness of the wicked sisters. Albany says of them: ‘This judgment of the heavens, that makes us tremble, / Touches us not with pity’ (V.iii.233-4). The tragic victims, however, affect us quite differently.

To attempt to shift that position by denying Lear’s rights as a father and a man would be to deny the pity of Lear’s suffering and the pleasurable reaffirmation of one’s humanity through sympathetic fellow feeling. A feminist reading of the text cannot simply assert the countervailing rights of Goneril and Regan, for to do so would simply reverse the emotional structures of the play, associating feminist ideology with atavistic selfishness and the monstrous assertion of individual wills. Feminism cannot simply
take ‘the woman’s part’ when that part has been so morally loaded and theatrically circumscribed. Nor is any purpose served by merely denouncing the text’s misogyny, for King Lear’s position at the centre of the Shakespeare canon is assured by its continual reproduction in education and the theatre and is unlikely to be shifted by feminist sabre-rattling.

A more fruitful point of entry for feminism is in the process of the text’s reproduction. As Elizabeth Cowie and others have pointed out, sexiest meaning are not fixed but depend upon constant reproduction by their audience. In the case of King Lear the text is tied to misogynist meaning only if it is reconstructed with it emotional power and its moral imperatives intact. Yet the text contains possibilities for subverting these meanings and the potential for reconstructing them in feminist terms.

The first of these lies in the text’s historical otherness; for in spite of constant critical assertion of its transcendent universality, specific connections can be shown between Shakespeare’s text and contemporary material and ideological conflict without presenting a merely reductive account of artistic production in terms of material circumstances.

Discussing the ‘gerontocratic ideal’ for example, Keith Thomas has noted that ‘The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are conspicuous for a sustained desire to subordinate persons in their teens and twenties and to delay their equal participation in the adult world… such devices were also a response to the mounting burden of population on an inflexible economy’. This gerontocratic ideal was not without contradiction, for the very elderly were removed from economic and political power and ‘essentially it was men in their forties or fifties ruled’. Moreover the existence of this ideal did not obviate the need for careful material provision for the elderly. There is certain poignancy in the detail of wills which specify the exact housetroom and the degree of access to the household fire which is to be left to aged parents. However, this suggests that Lear’s and his daughter’s bargaining over the number of his knights need not be seen as an egregious insult and that the generational conflict within the nuclear family could not be resolved by recourse to a simply accepted ideal of filial piety.

As a corrective to prevailing gloomy assessments of the happiness of the early modern family, Keith Wrightson has produced evidence of individuals who show considerable concern to deal with family conflict in a humane and flexible fashion. But
it is equally clear from his evidence that family relations were the focus of a great deal of emotional energy and the primary source both of pleasure and pain. This is also borne out in Michael Macdonald’s account of a seventeenth-century psychiatric practice in which, as today, women were more susceptible to mental illness than men:

Not all the stress women suffered was caused by physical illness… women were also more vulnerable than men to psychologically disturbing social situations. Their individual propensities to anxiety and sadness were enhanced by patriarchal custom and values that limited their ability to remedy disturbing situations… Napier and his troubled patients also believed that oppression made people miserable and even mad, but the bondage they found most troubling subordinated daughters to parents, wives to husbands rather than peasants to lords.

This discussion of social history cannot propose an alternative ‘interpretations’ of the text or assert its true meaning in the light of historical ‘facts’. Rather it indicates that the texts was produced within the contradictions of contemporary ideology and practice and suggest that

Similar contradictions exist within the play. These contradictions could fruitfully be brought to bear in modern criticism and productions. The dispute between Lear and his daughters is in part concerned with love and filial gratitude but it also dramatizes the tense relationship between those bonds and the material circumstances in which they function. Lear’s decision to publish his daughter’s dowries is so ‘that future strife / May be prevented now’: the connection between loving harmony and economic justice is the accepted factor which underlies the formal patterning of the opening scene and is disrupted only by Cordelia’s asides which introduce a notion of love as a more individual and abstract concept, incompatible both with public declaration and with computation of forests, champains, rivers and meads. Cordelia’s notion of love gained precedence in modern ideology but it seriously disrupts Lear’s discussion of property and inheritance. When Lear responds with ‘Nothing will come of nothing’ his words need not be delivered as an angry calling to account: they could equally be presented as a puzzled reaction to an inappropriate idea.

Cordelia is not opposing hereditary duty to transcendent love – she does not reply ‘There’s beggary in the love that can be reckoned’. When she expands on her first assertion her legal language suggests a preference for a limited, contractual relationship:
‘I love neither your majesty/According to my bond, no more nor less’. The conflict between the contractual model and the patriarchal model of subjects’ obligations to their king was at issue in contemporary political theory and Cordelia’s words hers introduce a similar conflict into the question of obligations within the family.

When in Act II Lear again bargains with his daughters, a similar confusion between affective relations and contractual obligations is in play. Lear asserts the importance of the contractual agreement made with his daughter, for it is his only remaining source of power. Since they are now in control, Goneril and Regan can assert an apparently benign notion of service which does not depend on contract or mathematical computation:

What need you five and twenty? ten? or five?

To follow in a house where twice so many

Have a command to tend you?

The misogyny *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. However the text also dramatizes conditions which lie behind assertions of power within the family, even it expresses deep anxieties about the chaos which can ensue when that balance of power is altered.

An important part of the feminist is to insist that the alternative to the patriarchal family and heterosexual love is not chaos but the possibility of new forms of social organization and affective relationships. However, feminists also recognize that our socialization within the family and, perhaps more importantly, our psychological development gendered subjects make these changes no simple matter. They involve deconstructing the sustaining comforts of love and the family as the only haven in a heartless world.
Works Cited


3. ‘The problem of stereotyping is not that it is true or false, distorting or manipulated, but that is closes off certain productions of meaning in the image’ (Elizabeth Cowie, ‘Images of Women’, *Screen Education*, 23 [1977], 22).


5. See Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh, *The Anti-Social Family* (London, 1982).