

## **GONERIL AND REGAN ESSAY PLAN**

*Goneril and Regan are not evil; they are formidable women asserting themselves in an otherwise male-dominated world. Discuss.*

### **GONERIL:**

- Married to Albany
- Goneril speaks in verse and not in poem form when speaking to Regan during act 1 scene 1, Shakespeare used poems for the characters of lower class. Goneril is also disloyal, greedy, power-hungry and vicious
- Lear says 'degenerate bastard' to Goneril – it could be argued that Queen Lear must have had an affair
- She poisons Regan and we gather from Albany that she is going to commit suicide – she could either die defiantly or dejectedly and desperately. We later find she stabs herself
- Shakespeare based the character on *Gonorilla*, a personage described by in the chronicle "The History of the Kings of Britain"
- The name Goneril, which seems eerily close to the word Gonorrhoea, gives a clue that this is not a very nice character. Her name is no accident; Shakespeare intended her to be like a disease full of venom and very dangerous.

### **REGAN:**

- Regan is usually referenced by clumping her with Goneril or her husband Cornwall. Regan is rarely given individual consideration.
- Married to Cornwall - She has in Cornwall a husband whose heart beats in perfect unison with her own against her father
- In the beginning Regan seems happy to follow Goneril's course of action.
- However, we get hints of sadism in when she urges Cornwall to inflict further punishment on Kent.
- Regan refers to Lear as "sir" and later progresses to call him "old man" and the "lunatic king"
- She feels it is best for Edmund to get with her as she is a widow so it is more convenient – not using love, materialistic desires
- Nahum Tate wrote an adaptation of King Lear entitled The History of King Lear. Tate assigned several of Cornwall's lines to Regan. The result is that Regan takes more initiative while executing punishments making Cornwall and Regan equals. Regan also actively pursues a relationship with Edmund prior to her husband's death

## **GONERIL AND REGAN TOGETHER:**

- Both sisters share many character traits; they are both threatening and autocratic, cold and ambitious.
- This same appetite leads to their downfall
- Personifications of evil
- It is easy to think of them as instruments of the plot; not so much ungrateful persons as personifications of ingratitude.
- According to Gloucester, “his daughters seek his death”
- They turn their father out in to the storm and pluck out Gloucester’s eyes
- They’re often referred to using animal imagery – Goneril is seen as “wolvish” and her tongue “serpent-like”. In his madness Lear sees Goneril and Regan as “pelican daughters” who cruelly feed on his flesh.
- Lear feels his daughters are also a ‘disease that’s in my flesh’ – Goneril and Regan have wounded Lear and now eat away at his flesh.
- Their filial ingratitude might seem to secure some sisterly attachment between them. To show that the same principle which unites them against their father will also divide them against each other.
- There is so much sameness of temper and behaviour in them that we find it somewhat difficult to distinguish them as individuals; their characteristic traits being fused and run together in the heat of a common malice
- In Edmund, they find a character wicked enough, and energetic enough in his wickedness, to interest their feelings. It is noteworthy that their passion for him proceeds mainly upon his treachery to his father, as though from such similarity of action they inferred a congeniality of mind.
- They both lust after Edmund in a predatory and unfeminine way. In Elizabethan times, they would have been seen as breaking free from passive female roles and turning to masculine aggressiveness. And so they would have been shocking to a Jacobean audience as renaissance models of femininity required women to be quiet and submissive.
- An audience’s dislike of Goneril and Regan is primarily created by their lust for power. However, in a male character this trait may not be so distasteful.
- Cornelius Jansenius coined the phrase Libido Sentiendi (the animal-like appetite for sensation) that define the driving forces of man's depravity. Libido sentiendi rules especially in Goneril and Regan.
- In act 1 scene 1 we may temporarily sympathise with them as they are not Lear’s favourite and they clearly have been told so.
- They knew Cordelia was his favourite, so could we justify their actions? Perhaps they felt underappreciated or unloved which caused them to turn sour. It does not condone their actions but may give some insight into why they turn away their father. Maybe they felt that he did not love and care for them when they were younger so why should they care for him now in his old age. Additionally their actions may be justified when we find that their mother is not present and thus they could have suffered maternal depravation as children, something which Bowlby concluded would lead them to make excessive demands as adults
- They cover up their depravity with attractive exteriors.
- Their words are empty with all they say during the love
- The bloodlust seen by Goneril, Regan and Cornwall is an abhorrent kind of madness.
- The Fool says Lear has “banished 2 daughters” – 2? He is suggesting that he has driven Goneril and Regan away too by giving them all his power

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- The sisters are completely unmoved by Lear's show of passion and emotion, they're completely cold
- We see the sisters cutting of Lear when he speaks
- Wooden stools represent the sisters during Lear's mock trial and the wood is described as "warped", showing that the sisters have an unnatural, twisted and perverse nature.
- Given that love contests in mythology invariably involved the choice of a wife, it is perhaps not fanciful to understand Goneril and Regan as Lear's mistresses, at least on an emotional level, while Cordelia fulfils the role of wife.

Shakespeare took inspiration from Sir Brian Annesley (1603). His eldest daughters tried to have him certified as a senile lunatic so that they could take over his property

- **THORNDIKE** calls them "inhuman sisters"
- **HUDSON** even calls them "personifications of ingratitude"
- **SPENCER** - They have been seen as animals who 'violate their proper functions as human beings by their lust for Edmund'
- **COPPELIA KAHN** - "Lear goes mad because he is unable to accept his dependence on the feminine, his daughters"
- 'They told me I was everything: 'tis a lie" → they simply lied to him
- "This Child-changed father"
- Regan calls Gloucester "old man"