

Becoming Vicious: The Making of the Elder Daughters in Shakespeare's King Lear and Edward St. Aubyn's Dunbar

Ms. Anupama Murali¹ and Dr. S. Selvalakshmi²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English Karpagam Academy of Higher Education Coimbatore.

²Professor & Head of the Department Department of English Karpagam Academy of Higher Education Coimbatore

Received:

02/10/2025

Revised: 31/10/2025

Accepted:

08/11/2025

Published:

18/11/2025

ABSTRACT

The character representation and formation in a text within a society is greatly influenced by its culture. Culture plays a significant role in shaping themes, characters and settings of a story. The fictional narrative is a representation of culture of a particular time and place and allows reader to understand the social, political and historical context in which the plot develops. This paper examines how and why these elder daughters, Goneril and Regan in Shakespeare's King Lear and Abigail and Megan in Edward St. Aubyn's Dunbar become symbols of cruelty. The explanation places their viciousness inside patriarchal frameworks that deny them real subjectivity, forcing them to express power through disobedience and manipulation, drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's conception of women as "Other." How these women absorb and replicate the very mechanisms that oppress them is further revealed by Foucault's notion of power as relational and persistent. The study contends that structural oppression and the fight for agency within hierarchies dominated by men, rather than innate evil, are the causes of their moral degeneration. The study highlights persistent conflicts between gender, power, and the societal construction of female transgression by contrasting Shakespeare's tragedy with St. Aubyn's contemporary adaptation. The gender roles, class distinctions and power dynamics shapes the character's lives changes and the paper tries to analyze the formation of the daughters' characters which is reflected in the gender roles, familial power dynamics, and socio-cultural expectations.

Keywords: culture, time, power, gender, society

INTRODUCTION:

Shakespeare's tragedy, King Lear, is a play of power, deceit, madness, and redemption. His daughter's void declaration love towards him persuaded the king to divide his kingdom among his two daughters, Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia. Under hasty judgement Lear disowns his youngest daughter Cordelia, who declines to succumb herself to the words of flattery. The numerous adaptations and reinterpretations of King Lear exemplify its significance irrespective of time and space. The political unpredictability of Elizabethan era, marked by the strict social hierarchy and patriarchal family system are reflected in the play. King Lear's characterisation is influenced by the cultural factors of the time as reflected in authority, power, family, and human nature.

A modern retelling of King Lear, Dunbar (2017) by Edward St. Aubyn takes place in the competitive realm of corporate media empires. Henry Dunbar, a billionaire media tycoon, is the protagonist of the book. Like Lear, he takes the terrible choice to cede control of his enterprise to his two ambitious and cunning daughters, Abigail and Megan, while shunning his devoted son, Florence. Dunbar is imprisoned in a distant mental hospital, contemplating his past transgressions and fighting to regain his lost independence as his daughters plot to keep him helpless.

St. Aubyn's version modernises Shakespeare through the representations of power, capitalism and greed. The present version examines family relations in the contemporary perspective where deceptive nature of success and accomplishment is criticised. The life trajectory of Lear is mirrored in Dunbar's downfall into madness and eventual realisation. St. Aubyn presents a piercing sense of humour and sarcasm making it a powerful 21st-century parallel to King Lear placing the scene from a mediaeval monarchy to a modern corporate empire.

Women in the Elizabethan period were restricted in the chains of submissiveness and obedience. Her identity was limited to domesticity. Women like Goneril and Regan were the part of this social norm where their authority was suppressed. The lack of authority followed by their long suppressions prompted them to succumb to deceptive tactics for asserting their authority. While they attempted to mark their voices in the society that marginalised them, Goneril and Regan were haunted by the societal notion that women were owned by their fathers or spouse. To overcome the limitations imposed upon them they used the technique of guile and deceit to accomplish their motives. Their unlimited quest for power and their conflict over Edmund, led their way to self-destruction. Lear's vanity is recognized by both sisters, who take advantage of it. Goneril and Regan show their desire to exploit for their own benefit right away with their bogus praise. Goneril and Regan collaborate to deprive Lear of his residual power once they get their inheritance. By cutting back on his retinue, they weaken his authority and eventually render him helpless in the storm. The play's overarching theme, the perils of unbridled ambition and the susceptibility of elderly monarchs to political manoeuvring is reflected in their deeds. At first, Goneril and Regan put up a united front, cooperating to put down Lear and then Gloucester. But as they get more powerful, their solidarity disintegrates into hostile rivalry, particularly over Edmund. This change emphasises how shaky relationships based more on self-interest than true loyalty.

The fall of Goneril and Regan's is hastened by the arrival of Edmund, Gloucester's illegitimate son. Edmund, an attractive and ambitious opportunist, attracts both sisters' lust, which has fatal results. Edmund's potential as a tough ally is acknowledged by both sisters. As the spouse of the feeble Albany, Goneril views Edmund as a more formidable and brutal companion. By implying that Albany is unfit to rule, she expresses her want to have Edmund take his place. In an

How to cite: Ms. Anupama Murali and S. Selvalakshmi. Becoming Vicious: The Making of the Elder Daughters in Shakespeare's King Lear and Edward St. Aubyn's Dunbar. *Advances in Consumer Research*. 2025;2(5):1578–1580

attempt to gain power and a husband who shares her brutal ambition, Regan, who was just widowed following Cornwall's death, also pursues Edmund. Fearing that she would wed Edmund and solidify power, Goneril covertly plans to eliminate Regan. Realising this, Regan grows more and more frantic to win Edmund's allegiance. They are so preoccupied with one other that they fail to see how Edmund is taking advantage of them both. In order to destroy Regan as a competitor, Goneril eventually poisons her. Goneril suicides after discovering that Edmund has suffered a fatal wound and that her husband Albany discovered her betrayal. At first, Goneril and Regan's quest for wealth and power gives them control, but their greed ultimately breeds obsession, betrayal, and ruin. As an example of how ambition may transform allies into adversaries, their relationship with Edmund is the driving force behind their demise. Shakespeare depicts them as representatives of political corruption, demonstrating how people who pursue merciless ambition without moral restraint eventually get consumed.

By displaying ambition and ruthlessness that are generally associated with male characters, Goneril and Regan break social expectations. They directly pursue power by deceiving their father, King Lear, and abandoning family ties in order to take over his realm. They had a planned approach to fulfil their wants, as evidenced by their willingness to lie about her love for Lear. As they become more powerful, Goneril and Regan defy gender norms by assuming a leadership role that is usually held by men. She exhibits characteristics that are frequently seen as "masculine," such as assertiveness and ambition, in contrast to the subservient position that is expected of women. Their trickery ultimately results in their collapse, even if they were initially successful in attaining power. Their vicious quest for power causes them to become estranged from others, which exemplifies disastrous results of transgressing the borders.

Elizabethan society was deeply patriarchal, with women legally and socially dependent on men. Influenced by Christian doctrines and Renaissance humanism, women were seen as weaker than men both physically and intellectually. "The woman is a weak creature, not endued with like strength and constancy of mind." (The Homily on the State of Matrimony, 1563). This reinforces the notion that women should be guided and controlled by their male counterparts. Lear's curse upon Goneril reflects the societal expectation that women's primary role was reproduction. A barren woman was considered inadequate.

"Into her womb convey sterility,

Dry up in her the organs of increase." (King Lear, I.iv.294-295)

Women in the Elizabethan England were conditioned to accept submission rather than naturally being inferior, with the stringent patriarchal norms. As Simone de Beauvoir in her work, *The Second Sex* says, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman". The main societal expectation for women was marriage, and their worth was frequently correlated with their capacity to reproduce. Marilyn Frye's argument in her work *Oppression*, the social restrictions placed on women are similar to a birdcage; while each expectation like marriage, obedience, and chastity, may appear minor but taken as a whole, they form a framework that restricts the agency of women. In Elizabethan England, women's roles were restricted to the strict patriarchal ideals, and those who did not conform to them were frequently portrayed as dangerous or abnormal. This anxiety is embodied through Goneril and Regan in *King Lear*. Although strict gender willed women who oppose patriarchal authority are regarded as evil. Stereotypes were followed in Elizabethan culture, though individuals such as Queen Elizabeth I disrupted these expectations.

The novel's parallels to Shakespeare's Goneril and Regan are Megan and Abigail in Edward St. Aubyn's *Dunbar*, the contemporary adaptation of *King Lear*. They are cunning and vicious, just like their Shakespearean counterparts, and they wanted to take advantage of their father, Henry Dunbar, and his media empire. Like their Shakespearean counterparts, they represent themes of ambition, greed, and betrayal in a modern corporate and media-driven society as the daughters of media tycoon Henry Dunbar.

The two sisters' eldest, Megan, shares Goneril's brutality and desire for dominance. St. Aubyn, on the other hand, modernises and polishes her portrayal, portraying her as a calculating and frigid businesswoman who aspires to take over her father's enormous media empire, Dunbar Trust. Megan will stop at nothing to ensure her inheritance, even if it means working with Abigail to have their father placed in a care facility after being deemed mentally ill. This is a reflection of the business world's propensity to marginalise more senior executives in favour of their more brutal, younger successors. Megan just cares about Dunbar in order to keep him helpless while she and Abigail increase their influence. Megan's relationship with her father, Henry Dunbar, lacks affection, similar to Goneril's in *King Lear*. Megan's deceitful inclinations are on display as she plots with Abigail to have him admitted in a mental asylum, by removing him from power. Despite being Abigail's original ally, Megan quietly controls their alliance and frequently takes the lead in making decisions. But, as in *King Lear*, their partnership breaks down when power becomes accessible, demonstrating how brittle their union is. Similar to how Goneril and Regan utilises Edmund in *King Lear*, her encounters with Dr. Bob, a cunning psychiatrist who helps them with their plot, emphasise how she depends on outside forces to carry out her schemes.

The younger of the two, Abigail, is Regan's opposite, yet she has certain qualities that set her apart from both her sister and her Shakespearean equivalent. Abigail is just as guilty in their father's infidelity as Megan, although being marginally less domineering. She backs the plan to deprive Dunbar of his wealth and influence, but she pauses sometimes, showing a glimmer of doubt that Megan does not. Megan and Abigail have a cooperative but underlying competitive connection. Abigail and Megan have a tense but mutually beneficial relationship. Although they cooperate to overthrow their father, their partnership is motivated more by self-interest than by genuine sisterly love. Often the one in charge, Megan quietly manipulates Abigail as needed. But as the book goes on, she starts to worry that Megan will take more charge, which makes her paranoid and ultimately causes them to argue. In contrast to Megan's more calculated approach, Abigail's reasons seem shallower because she sets a lot of value on riches, luxury, and status. By transforming her desire for power into corporate greed and societal ambition, this modernises Regan's Shakespearean persona. Abigail occasionally shows hesitancy, indicating an internal conflict between ambition and dread of the repercussions, whereas Megan is unrelenting in her brutality. But she still supports and acts on their mutual betrayal, therefore this does not make her right. Similar to the partnership of Goneril and Regan, Megan and Abigail function as a powerful team. Nevertheless, their bond is based on shared aspiration rather than sisterly love. Although their relationship is marked by strategic cooperation, there is a conflict at its core because both parties are ultimately self-serving. This is consistent with *King Lear*, as Goneril and Regan's momentary union is overshadowed by personal ambition, causing their unity to erode.

Megan is a contemporary example of the cutthroat corporate ambition character. She adopts the most ruthless strategies to

How to cite: Ms. Anupama Murali and S. Selvalakshmi. Becoming Vicious: The Making of the Elder Daughters in Shakespeare's King Lear and Edward St. Aubyn's Dunbar. *Advances in Consumer Research*. 2025;2(5):1578–1580

maintain her authority as a woman negotiating a patriarchal corporate environment. Both sisters reflect Goneril and Regan's political aspirations in King Lear, embodying the corporate brutality of the twenty-first century. The main conflict of the book is fuelled by their mutual contempt for their father, deceit, and treachery. Abigail's erratic hesitations and emotional reactions set her apart from the totally wicked Regan, while Megan's intelligence and decisiveness make her a more direct resemblance to Goneril. Megan and Abigail Dunbar are modern-day versions of Shakespeare's Goneril and Regan, emphasising themes of filial treachery, power battles, and corporate greed.

Feminist theories and new cultural narratives have provided significant changes in women's roles. Edward St. Aubyn's novel Dunbar, a contemporary adaptation of Shakespeare's King Lear, encapsulates the changes brought in the society especially in its depiction of female ambition and power. The book underlines the drawbacks of a paradigm that only emphasises individualism. The unethical power struggles of Megan and Abigail highlight the fact that individual achievement is not the same as group advancement. Dunbar reflects current debates on women's roles, especially those pertaining to power and ambition. The novel highlights the need to address systemic concerns influencing women's lives in contemporary Britain by criticising the neoliberal and postfeminist emphasis on individual success through Megan and Abigail. Women's self-identities are being rethought as culturally produced and independent of biological destiny after centuries of male supremacy. It is challenging for a woman to define herself without first determining her gender. The ability to define oneself without highlighting one's masculinity is an advantage enjoyed by men. 'Yet man has long defined the —eternal feminine! and a woman learns her role in culture and circumstance through the construction of civilization' (de Beauvoir, 13). Women, power relations, and the social repression of ambitious women may all be adequately examined using Michel Foucault's theory of power. This junction shows how societal norms and power dynamics suppress women who challenge traditional roles, particularly those who are perceived as "power hungry" or overly ambitious. He challenges accepted notions of power by emphasising how it is relational, ubiquitous, and productive. He argues that power is not a resource or a weapon held by individuals or organisations, but rather a web of connections embedded in society that influences behaviours and actions.

Foucault makes a distinction between several types of power, such as sovereign power, which has historically relied on overt authority and force, and disciplinary power, which discreetly governs populations through normalisation and surveillance. Michel Foucault's power theory provides a framework for understanding how social structures suppress aspiring women. In contemporary society, ambitious women often face unique challenges due to long-standing stereotypes. Women who are assertive or want to be in positions of leadership are sometimes referred to be "vicious" or "power-hungry," disparaging terms that are rarely applied to men who display similar traits. This double standard stems from gender-based assumptions that see women as cooperative and nurturing rather than controlling or authoritative. Media representations and societal narratives, like the "Black Swan" cliché, which implies that female ambition results in self-destruction, loneliness, and personal sacrifice, reinforce these prejudices.

In Dunbar, Edward St. Aubyn places Lear's daughters in a corporate empire where a patriarchal structure determines their worth. Even though Abigail and Megan are not inherently evil, their father's cruel and exploitative business environment has moulded them into such individuals, and they have learnt

to use dishonesty to obtain power since they are denied the right to do so. These women simply followed in their father's footsteps and inherited his desire for power. Shakespeare's Goneril and Regan's desire for power is portrayed as abnormal. This illustrates how women who aspire to positions of power are frequently forced to adhere to patriarchal standards and are frequently robbed of the so-called femininity that consistently associates women with weakness and softness. A man who pursues power and control is viewed as brave and manly in the patriarchal system, but a woman who does the same will be criticised and even denied the term "human."

REFERENCES

1. Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Classic, 2015.
2. Dollimore, Jonathan. *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*. Duke University Press, 1984.
3. Frye, Marilyn. "Gender Basics." *Feminist Perspectives on Women and Men*, edited by Anne Minas, 2nd ed., Wadsworth, 2000, Belmont.
4. Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale University Press, 1979.
5. Kahn, Coppélia. "The Absent Mother in King Lear." *Shakespeare's Rough Magic*, edited by Peter Erickson and Coppélia Kahn, U of Delaware P, 1985.
6. Mack, Maynard. *King Lear in Our Time*. Routledge, 2010.
7. McLuskie, Kathleen. "The Patriarchal Bard: Feminist Criticism and King Lear." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 1, 1985, pp. 30-41.
8. Sanders, Julie. *Adaptation and Appropriation*. Routledge, 2006.
9. Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Education Publishers, 2010.
10. St. Aubyn, Edward. *Dunbar*. Hogarth Shakespeare, 2017.