**‘Sure I shall never marry like my sisters.’ Examine Shakespeare’s presentation of marital relationships in *King Lear.***

*King Lear* is based on a story that Shakespeare heard of two daughters who wished their father to be declared mad, in order to inherit his land. Although set in Pagan times, *Lear* was performed in Jacobean times, following the death of Elizabeth 1, meaning that the audience could identify with the strong females in the play who defied the stereotypical portrayal of women, just as their queen had done.

In *Lear* the relationship that is different to the expectations of the time is the relationship between the evil Goneril and her husband, Albany. Although Albany is a duke, it is Goneril who inherits the land. Goneril becomes obsessed with the power she gains and treats her husband almost as a servant rather than a partner of equal status. She makes all the decisions herself, such as when she decides to throw Lear out and Albany has no idea: ‘My lord I am guiltless, as I am ignorant/Of what has moved you.’ The pre-modifying adjectives ‘guiltless’ and ‘ignorant’ convey Albany’s lack of knowledge. This suggest that he is not important enough for Goneril to share her plots with.

Goneril’s constant interrupting of Albany also conveys that she is in charge -

‘Albany: I cannot be so partial, Goneril

To the great love I bear you –

Goneril: Pray you content.’

Goneril tells Albany, using the imperative mood to stop talking, showing once more that she is going against the times as women would not usually speak in this manner to their husbands.

Goneril’s lack of respect for her husband is because she thinks he is weak. She describes him as ‘our mild husband’ to Edmund. The pre-modifying adjective ‘mild’ conveys that she does not believe he has the strength. Later in the play Goneril calls Albany ‘Milk-livered man’. This conveys Goneril’s thinks her husband is weak as the noun ‘liver’ gives a grotesque image. But Albany is not weak. He argues back with ‘Wisdom and goodness to the vile seem vile’. The sibilance here creates a hissing sound similar to that made by a serpent, conveying how evil Albany believes Goneril to be. The audience were familiar with the deceitful serpent in the book of Genesis.

Albany is not just a victim though because he also does not respect for his wife. He describes her as a beast: ‘Thy flesh and bones; howev’er thou art a fiend/ A woman’s shape does shield thee.’ This declarative suggests his wife is wicked. In Shakespeare’s time the audience would have been frightened at the mention of demons and it shows how evil Albany thinks Goneril is.

Power is why the pair come to blows violently in Act 4 Scene 2. The argument shows Albany standing up for himself. He uses the command: ‘Shut your mouth dame!’. Albany is mocking his wife by calling her dame instead of majesty or queen. This means Albany is in control for a moment and Goneril does not have as much power as she thinks she does.

The power in Regan and Cornwall’s relationship is more equal. They share power in their treatment of Gloucester. Cornwall takes out Gloucester’s first eye, then Goneril uses imperatives to demand that Cornwall takes out the other eye ‘One side will mock another; the other too.’ This conveys how the power passes from one to the other. Regan calls Gloucester a ‘filthy traitor’, the pre-modifying adjective ‘filthy’ conveys Regan’s opinion of him. Cornwall calls him a ‘villain’. These similar words mean the pair are united, unlike Goneril and Albany.

Regan and Cornwall are also closer than Goneril and Albany. Regan charges at her husband’s attacker and kills him shouting ‘A peasant stand up thus!’ The plosive ‘p’ in peasant shows Regan is shocked that her husband was in danger. Cornwall refers to his wife as ‘my Regan’. The pronoun ‘my’ shows that Cornwall feels responsible for Regan. This conveys the attitudes of the time, that wives were their husbands’ properties.

So, the difference between the two relationships is clear. The relationship between Goneril and Albany defies expectations, whilst Regan is more prepared to let her husband take control of things.