



## **The Representation of Women in Shakespearean Texts**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the representation of women in selected plays of Shakespeare. It is seen that women play, or are made to play, roles ranging from the innocent to the complex and devious, to accommodate the needs of the text and of society. It shows that the naturalisation and the universalization of the woman's role in different societal positions cannot be seen in isolation from hidden patriarchal figurations. The Shakespearean text cannot avoid some of the socially acceptable practices in the presentation of women characters. However, the presentation of women in Shakespeare is neither a blatant exhibition of patriarchal ideology, nor an uncritical celebration of its collapse. At crucial moments in the Shakespearean text is ambivalent on the issue of patriarchy and even in the face of its apparent collapse. The ambivalence notwithstanding, what needs to be examined is why women in Shakespeare's plays appear to enjoy textual and ideological space, but are ultimately made to subscribe or submit to the patriarchal order. Recent scholarship on Shakespeare has been increasingly drawn to the representation of gender in Shakespeare's plays.

**Keywords:** Shakespearean, scholarship, naturalization, increasingly, Women

### **Introduction**

Traditionally Shakespeare's plays have been lauded for the depiction of witty and intelligent female characters in and out of love. During the late 1970s and the early 1980s critics motivated by the feminist movements, began an examination of gender in the works of Shakespeare. Gender system depicts the variety of ways in which Shakespeare responded imaginatively to gender as a crucial determinant of human identity. By gender we mean the difference between male and female. Male or female desire to be the same or opposite sex and this varies from culture to culture and changes historically. Masculinity is typically associated with sexual aggression in our time, whereas in Shakespeare's time women were considered to be more lustful than men. The question of gender ensured that certain roles were determined for women in society by a particular ideology. Any transgression or refusal to adhere to a set pattern was seen as unnatural and deviant. Again, interpretations of action and ideas were made along gendered terms. Certain types of behaviour or conduct, including work and participation in the public world of power politics and social welfare were deemed as a masculine preserve and so out of bounds for women. Women who showed any interest in education, work (other than domestic) or public affairs were discouraged and even penalised. Their territory was restricted to the home and hearth.

The characters of women play an essential role in Shakespeare's plays. Just as in reality, women of Shakespeare's dramas are also seen to be bound to the conventions. First of all we have to understand the patriarchal issues, if we want to understand Shakespeare's plays. In the late sixteenth century patriarchy meant the power of the father over everyone in the household, including servants and apprentices. Early culture was hierarchical, with women under the rule of men. Women were believed to be less rational than men and were deemed

to need male protection and guidance. In Elizabethan times, women were considered as the weaker sex, because their sexuality was supposedly mystic and therefore feared by men. Women of that era were supposed to represent virtues like obedience, silence, constancy, and patience. All these virtues, of course, have their meaning in relationship to men. The role allocation in Elizabethan society was strictly regulated; men were the breadwinners and woman had to be obedient housewives and mothers. However, within this deprived, tight and organized scope, women are represented in most diverse ways in Shakespearean Drama. Women had few legal or economic rights and her identity was subsumed under her male protector. Women were made to accept their natural inferiority which was instilled into them mainly because of their financial insolvency: they had to depend on their fathers or guardians for support. In order not to lose authority over women, men condemned women as shrews or scolds.

A women's social status was assessed by her economic position, chastity, and fidelity.

But women of all social classes ventured out in public, like Shakespeare's own theatre audience. Women also held productive roles in the economy. However, Shakespeare limits his presentation of economic, labour to that of household servants, tavern-keepers, bawds and prostitutes. Interestingly, Shakespeare's London had a visible female presence: they could be seen assisting in household matters as well as buying and selling in the market, engaging in litigation on their own, and frequenting the playhouses. In Southwark the immediate vicinity of the theatres, some of the household were headed by women. While the projection of some energetic and somewhat emancipated women might have attracted a section of female theatre going public, the male spectators would have responded with anxious hostility to the representation of women's power and autonomy. Women in Shakespeare's age appear to have had a good deal. While unmarried women seem to have had

virtually all the rights of a man, it was impossible for a woman to remain unmarried and independent. Marriages were arranged to further the interest of power either in the form of land or the throne. On marriage the girl's legal rights ceased and she became a property of her husband. Some husbands broke with the medieval conventions and allowed their wives to take part in running a business or to join a Guild, but this did not give the wives any kind of legal independence. While they gained confidence and a greater sense of personal identity by being allowed out of the traditional sphere of the house, they were still seen as their husband's chattel. If for some reasons it was impractical for a girl to marry, she was encouraged to enter a nunnery. On entry all her possessions were made over to the religious house and she lost all secular rights. The only time a woman was likely to wield some influence was if her husband died and she was left in charge either of a business or of a family estate. In the eyes of the law then a woman was only theoretically the equal of a man. But in practice, most women were never able to wield any significant legal and political power because they 'belonged' either to a man or to the Church. There was however a significant development on the demand for education for women which grew out of the principles and activities of the humanists. The humanists did not, however, see girls and boys as equal. Their concept of education was founded on the old medieval principle that women were the weaker sex. They believed that women were more frivolous and than men. It was necessary, according to them, to have women educated in order to enable them to manage with their inherent scarcity. The humanists are seen to be working towards intellectual not social ends. Nevertheless it became a fashion for the girls from rich bourgeois, as well aristocratic families to learn foreign languages and study the scriptures. But throughout Shakespeare's drama women can be seen pushing against the patriarchal strictures.

A study of Shakespeare's plays, especially the history plays and the plays otherwise dealing with power politics shows that the stage of English history or even the world of statecraft was deemed to be no place for women. For example, in *Richard II*, when the Duchess of York goes to plead with the new king Henry IV, her conduct is presented as an indecorous intrusion. Similarly, Joan and Margeret (Henry VI) are demonised for their intrusion into the historical arenas of court and battlefield. The more active the female characters become the more negative is their characterisation. On the other hand helplessness seems to be an essential component of female virtue. The women are confined to enclosed domestic settings; they are kept away from the council chambers and battlefields. The picture becomes more complicated if we look beyond the prominent English History plays. *King John*, *Henry VIII* and the *Henry VI* plays, however, do include female characters who intervene in the historical action. In the opening scene of *King*

*John*, Eleanor announces that she is a soldier' and both Eleanor and Constance play leading roles in the conflict for the English throne. In *Richard III*, too, women have more space and pose a theatrical challenge to Richard with his demonic energy. Shakespeare's plays address some of these troublesome areas in the representation of gender and the roles given to women characters. They also touch upon some of the key patriarchal assumptions concerning gender. The world of real politik is considered to be outside the

province of women: the stage of history is no place for women. This view prevailed despite the reigns of Mary and then Elizabeth in England. Again martial valour is presented as a monstrous anomaly in women. In fact women are seen to be caught in a double bind in the Shakespearean play. Strong women like Goneril, Cleopatra and others are unchaste and unwomanly; virtuous women like Ophelia, Octavia and others are confined to playing roles of helpless tools or bystanders, powerless to affect the course of history. Thus the female characters in Shakespeare are confronted with a dilemma: they can be either womanly or warlike. They can be virtuous or powerful, never both. This suggests that the construction (and constriction) of women's roles was well under way in Shakespeare's times and gender specific territory was being charted out, with a little resistance no doubt.

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