

Shakespeare's Strong Women

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Women in Shakespearean plays have always had important roles, sometimes the leading role. Whether they create the main conflicts and base of the plays, or bring up interesting moral and cultural questions, they are put in challenging situations. Some women are stronger than others, and their effect on the play is different for each one. They often surpass the male heroes.

Shakespeare's women characters testify to his genius. They are drawn with neither anger nor condescension. In personality they vary. Some are warm, delightful, friendly; others cold, aloof, and scornful. Some speak with confidence; others with diffidence. They range in age from the youthful, joyous Juliet to the wizened, bitter Margaret. But most have a vitality; they grow and develop during the course of a drama. Their actions spring from a realistic confrontation with life as they learn the meaning of self-sovereignty for a woman in a patriarchal society.

Shakespeare focuses on this inequity. Men and women confront the same experience from opposite perspectives. By creating confident, attractive, independent women whom we like, he questions the wisdom of a power structure that insists they relinquish personal freedom. Some of his dramas question accepted patterns of behavior. Some stress the value of mutual

respect between a man and a woman. Some reveal the confusion in a woman's mind when she seeks to understand the limits of her world. Occasionally, a drama documents the tragedy of a woman who loses her way and her sense of self when she seeks to conform.

This paper is an attempt to portray the strong women of Shakespeare.

“Women in Shakespeare” is a fascinating topic. Women appear as supporting and central characters in Shakespeare's plays. In Shakespeare's tragedies and his plays in general, there are several types of female characters. They influence other characters, but are also often under estimated. Women in Shakespearean plays have always had important roles, sometimes the leading role. Whether they create the main conflicts and base of the plays, or bring up interesting moral and cultural questions, they are put in challenging situations. Some women are stronger than others, and their effect on the play is different for each one. They often surpass the male heroes.

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General Quality of Shakespeare's Women:

Shakespeare presents individuality and three-dimensional quality of women characters. Like the men, the women too respond to a variety of forces in their environment and are troubled by the world they see. But that world differs from the one perceived by men. Shakespeare gives us an ambiguous picture in which those who emphasize patriarchy and those who emphasize female activity can both find some elements to satisfy them and, if they wish, take those as the essentials. It seems that Shakespeare's ideal woman—the kind he presents in the most depth in the comedies—is active but willing to subordinate herself, like the ideal woman of the protestant preachers discussed by the Hallers. She can harmoniously combine strength and flexibility, individualism and compromise.

Tragic heroines like Juliet, Cordelia, and Desdemona also combine both of these qualities attractively. Desdemona, for example, bravely chooses Othello and defends her choice before Venice, but she uses the argument that she is acting just as her mother did in following her father. She stubbornly tries to carry out her promise to plead Cassio's case, but she lies about her handkerchief. She defends herself stoutly on her deathbed but she has put herself in the vulnerable position in which Othello can kill her. Her combination of qualities makes it possible for critics on both sides to praise her or criticize her, contrasts with the simple images Othello has of her, and contributes to the ultimate disaster. Shakespeare's women present the qualities of self-assertion and self-subordination. Following are the strong women of Shakespeare.

Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*

Portia performs the role of a man and manages the very wealthy estate after her father's death. Nevertheless, he has been able to exercise power over her from beyond the grave by stipulating in his will that those wealthy and powerful men who come to woo her from around the world will have to undergo a test and choose from three caskets, one of which contains the permission to marry Portia. When a judge is required by the Duke of Venice to try the case Shylock has brought against Antonio, who is reluctant to yield the pound of flesh he has agreed to give Shylock if he is unable to pay a loan in time. Portia comes disguised as a famous young judge and shows extraordinary qualities in delivering her judgment. Her power lies in her wisdom, recognised by all those who do not know that she is a woman. In a real sense she exercises power over everyone present.

Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*

Lady Macbeth is thought of as a very strong woman. She certainly exercises power over her husband, Macbeth, in the first half of the play, as she encourages him to murder Duncan. She uses her sexuality, she taunts him and mocks his lack of courage. She appeals to his sense of obligation towards her. She comes in more strongly as he wavers and finally he goes ahead with it. She seems like a strong woman but psychologically, she is not strong enough to deal with her guilt. Their marriage falls apart and they become estranged. She suffers terrible nightmares and finally commits suicide.

Beatrice in *Much Ado about Nothing*

Much Ado about Nothing is a remarkable play in which Shakespeare intertwines an ancient mythological story with an ultra-modern love story invented by himself. Beatrice is an independent woman. She does not have to disguise herself as a man because of her reputation in the family as a feisty woman who shouldn't be tangled with. She is highly intelligent and would be regarded as a feminist in our time. There is no question of her being told who to marry, as she will always do as she pleases, but in any case, she has contempt for men. She particularly dislikes Benedick, a soldier who visits Messina regularly and stays in her uncle, the governor's, house. Shakespeare has invented the most incredible wordplay between these two characters, who are both anti-marriage. But they are tricked by their friends into falling in love. Beatrice draws Benedick into a plot to get revenge on Claudio, who has betrayed her cousin, Hero, who was about to marry him. The play ends with the couple confirmed in their love and their decision to marry. Beatrice reverts to the traditional female role but in her case there is a decided edge to it.

Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*

Juliet would not be thought of as a woman in our time but at just fourteen she is already a commodity which her father, a rich merchant, is preparing to trade for a connection with a noble family. He is in the middle of that process just as she is falling in love with the teenaged Romeo. She has only one thing on her mind - to marry Romeo, who is not only not her father's choice, but forbidden fruit in that their families are involved in an ancient feud in which all contact between them is forbidden. Without telling her father the reason, she refuses to marry the

Count of Paris. This is spectacularly brave for the time and her father, Capulet, simply cannot understand it. He swears at her, threatens her and even strikes her. She does not give way, and desperate for a way out without giving up her love for Romeo, she seeks the advice of Friar Lawrence. His solution is to take a drug that will make her appear dead. She will be placed in a tomb and Romeo will come and take her away. She is terrified of waking in a tomb stuffed with corpses but takes the drug. She is a female of enormous determination and courage and is without doubt one of the strongest of all Shakespeare's characters.

Desdemona in *Othello*

Although Desdemona submits passively to her husband, Othello, as he strangles her to death, she demonstrates her strength at the beginning of the play when her father asks the Duke of Venice to stop her marriage to the Moor, Othello. He has ideas about who he wants to marry her to but she has fallen in love with a black man and he is opposed to their marriage, which has already taken place in secret by that time. The Duke asks her to give an account of herself and in a remarkable speech she convinces him. In that speech she comes across as a modern woman – an independent woman who has been a good daughter but is now ready to ally herself with her husband. If her father doesn't like that then it's just too bad. It isn't his business anymore. It required enormous strength to say things like that in a room full of powerful men at that time.

Viola in *Twelfth Night*

Finding herself shipwrecked on the beach at Ilyria, and having lost her twin brother in the wreck, Viola's first instinct is not to appeal for help as a helpless woman but to disguise herself as a man and find a job as a servant in the household of the Duke.

As a man she has the freedom to move around without a chaperone. Her ability to adapt herself to her circumstances is an indication of her strength. It is not only that adaptation that suggests strength but the ability to manipulate her circumstances for her own desired outcome, which is to marry the Duke.

Conclusion

Strong, attractive, intelligent, and humane women come to life in Shakespeare's plays. They not only have a clear sense of themselves as individuals, but they challenge accepted patterns for women's behaviour. Compliance, self-sacrifice for a male, dependence, nurturance, and emotionalism are the expected norms. Yet independence, self-control and, frequently, defiance characterize these women. In *The Winter's Tale*, for example, Hermione disdains tears although unjustly imprisoned; her husband, Leontes, weeps in self-pity. In *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*, women, exercising their independence, defy their fathers as well as the mores of their society.

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