

# **Female Characters in Shakespeare’s Selected Plays during Elizabethan Age**

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## **Abstract**

*Shakespeare's plays are praised for their portrayal of bright, attractive, and humorous female characters. Less than sixteen percent of the characters in all of his plays are female. There are 155 female characters and 826 male characters in the total of 981 characters. Shakespeare's plays have a number of strong female characters. They are politically astute. Shakespeare's most notable aspect of his portrayal of female protagonists is how powerfully he presents women in his plays. In King Lear, Cordelia Portia from "The Merchant of Venice," Lady Macbeth from "Macbeth," Beatrice from "Much Ado about Nothing," Juliet from "Romeo and Juliet," Desdemona from "Othello," Rosalind from "As You Like It," Viola from "Twelfth Night," Margaret of Anjou from "Henry VI, Parts-1, 2, 3, and Richard III," and Hemia from "A Midsummer Night's Dream," Despite Elizabeth I's dominance, women in this era had very little autonomy, authority, or acknowledgment. They were supposed to be obedient to their husbands and silent observers. In a genuine sense, women in Shakespeare's plays are also perceived as being constrained by patriarchal Elizabethan norms and regulations. During that time, women were expected to embody characteristics such as patience, humility, obedience, silence, sexual chastity, and constancy. Shakespeare makes extensive use of women, despite their relative insignificance in the patriarchal Elizabethan social structure. Despite the fact that women are sometimes disregarded, he seems to be quite attentive to their significance in society. Shakespeare acknowledges women as an important and genuine component of society. The female characters in Shakespeare's plays contribute significantly to the plot and subject, just like every other element of his plays.*

**Key Words:** *The patriarchal Elizabeth Age, Lively sensibility, full of wisdom, beauty and tenderness of thought*

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The world's finest English dramatist and poet is none other than William Shakespeare. His writings and literary creations are masterpieces that demonstrate not just artistic brilliance but also the capacity to push limits and further the interests of the human mind. Shakespeare does not create the division of human life; rather, he accomplishes so in a way that is more brilliant and striking than has ever been done before. It would have been in the public eye forever because of the beauty and tenderness of the idea that life is a sort of theater with episodes of joy and sadness interspersed, as well as the justice of the emotion.

Indirectly implying that women have a major influence on males in the plays is the notion that men are frequently products of the women in their lives. Desdemona, who has no real fault of her own, ends up being both Othello's blessing and his curse, while Isabella has a significant impact on the lives of Angelo and Claudio. One of the main reasons Antony failed was Cleopatra. Lady Macbeth, whose greatest ambition is to become queen at whatever costs, encourages Macbeth to carry out the witches' predictions. She forces her spouse to kill the king.

Therefore, both the comedies and tragedies bear the mark of women, one way or another. Women play main part. Beside every strong male character, there is a woman. In Shakespearean plays female characters are wiser and more rational than the main male characters. In many plays of Shakespeare, women offer reasoning to control the situation. In Othello, Desdemona surrenders before her husband passively. Othello puts her to death. She has been depicted as very powerful women in the beginning of the play when her father Brabantio asks the Duke of Venice to stop her marriage to the moor, Othello. Desdemona fully convinces the duke saying,

I saw Othello's Visage in his mind,  
And to his honour and his valiant parts  
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.

**(Act One, Scene Three)**

Desdemona like her husband is not secure. Othello calls her 'whore', even then she remains loyal to him and resolves to live with him and says,

My love doth so approve him  
That even his stubbornness, his checks, his frowns

**(Act Four, Scene Three)**

Desdemona is confined with rationality and tenacity. She does not shy away from her fear and bids Othello to do sensible things.

Emilia keeps trying to persuade Othello that Desdemona is innocent. Othello disregards Emilia's arguments when she tries to persuade him that his wife is truthful, chaste, and honest. Desdemona is Othello's perfect wife because she is lovely, kind, gentle, and charming. "The most exquisite lady" is how one calls her. She is the victim of this tragedy because of Iago's diabolical scheme and Othello's unbridled jealousy. Othello, who is older, poorer, and more ugly than Desdemona, wins her heart. Because of his unfortunate life, she feels sorry for him. She exhibits her bravery and logical side. She informs her father that she must fulfill her obligation to her spouse, just like her mother did. As a selfless sufferer, she stands up for her husband to the end of her life. Emilia is another significant female character in Othello. She is a courageous and admirable figure, much like Desdemona.

In his well-known drama Hamlet, Shakespeare portrays Ophelia, Hamlet's unlucky lover, as another significant, kind female character. She is a submissive, innocent, and affectionate woman who appears to be lost in the world around her and too harsh for her frail spirit. She is unable to comprehend both her lover and her own father. Her father's passing and her lover's disregard for her intense emotions caused her to have an unhappy existence. The very same tragedy is also marked by another female character queen Gertrude, Hamlet's mother. She is trapped into living with her husband's murderer but her gesture is not to be justified in any way.

Lady Macbeth is another female figure who is even more fixated on power. Her soul and actions are progressively taken over by ambition and evil. She forces her spouse to carry out the witches' predictions. At any costs, her greatest ambition is to become queen. She encourages her spouse to assassinate King Duncan. She is in charge of the entire crime scene. She places the dagger in her husband's hand, but she is tormented inside. She goes crazy and loses control. As a result, Lady Macbeth, who formerly believed that consciousness was reserved for cowards, is destroyed by remorse and passes away.

King Lear's older daughters, Goneril and Regan, are also female characters that are overly hypocritical in their utterances, but not to the same degree as Lady Macbeth. Cordelia claims to love him in accordance with his expectations of her as a daughter and the relationship between a parent and child. Their hatred and greed know no bounds, and their actions are vile and a scourge to humanity. Despite all of the sins in this play, Cordelia is the model of virtue. She possesses angelic qualities and is gentle, forgiving, virtuous, and loving. She is a loving daughter who holds his father, his status, and social conventions in high regard. Regretfully, she meets a horrible end and dies. She distinguishes between right and wrong. Unlike her older sister Goneril, King Lear's favorite daughter is Cordelia, the youngest. She stays silent during the king's prayers. "Nothing, My Lord," she exclaims; there are no words to adequately describe her love or anything to compare it to. She claims that she will save half of her love for her husband in the future and that she loves him in accordance with their relationship, neither more nor less. Consequently, the enraged King Lear disinherits Cordelia and divides her portion among her older sisters.

Cleopatra is another significant female character in Shakespeare's play "Antony and Cleopatra." Around 1606, the play was written. There are themes of irony and heroism throughout Antony and Cleopatra, which is a tragedy of passion. The Egyptian queen Cleopatra captivates Antony. She has been regarded as the love queen. She is the embodiment of love and eternity in the feminine. She uses the strings of love to take charge of her life, but she loses control of these things when something happens. She turns cold and ruthless. She is simultaneously a devil and an angel. In her soul, violence and tenderness coexist. The ebony seductress is Cleopatra. Like a moth to a flame, she enticed Antony to return to Egypt.

The character of Miranda in Shakespeare's final play, The Tempest, is another clearly defined example of a woman. Miranda's persona embodies every aspect of virtue and excellence. She is incredibly attractive, wise, modest, upbeat, and moral. Miranda is the most unadulterated character in all of Shakespeare's plays. No other male has ever touched her or even looked at her. Miranda seems almost like Christ in every aspect of her personality. Miranda's exceptional sweetness and purity make her an indispensable character.

Juliet is another strong female character in Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet." Juliet is unquestionably one of Shakespeare's finest female characters, possessing a great deal of bravery and will. Juliet refuses to wed the Count of Paris, despite her father's wishes for her marriage. Romeo is a teenager when Juliet falls in love with him, and she is resolved to wed him. Romeo and Juliet's families have a long-standing animosity that forbids them from communicating with one another. In the end, Juliet gives her life to save Romeo. Romeo is only focused on getting married to Juliet. Juliet is a courageous woman with a great deal of resolve.

Another central character in Shakespeare's play "As You Like It" is Rosalind, daughter of Banished Duke. She is disguised as a man throughout the play. She disguises herself as a shepherd named Ganymede. She organizes marriage of everyone according to her needs and desires. She marries Orlando who can match her qualities and as strong as She is. She makes Celia, her cousin (daughter of the Duke of Frederick) marry Oliver who can match her qualities and likeminded.

Another beautiful, intelligent, benevolent and wise female character of Shakespeare's play "Twelfth Night" is Viola. Twelfth Night is a fast paced romantic comedy containing several interwoven plots of romance. Having lost her twin brother in the shipwreck and finding herself at the beach of Ilyria, Viola's first instinct is not to appeal for help as a helpless woman but to disguise herself as aman and find a job as a servant in the household of the Duke. Her ability is to adapt herself according to circumstances in spite of her female upbringing. Viola has ability to manipulate her circumstances for her own wish. That is why she succeeds to marry the Duke and she also plays key role in the marriage between Olivia and Sebastian.

Shakespeare's representation of another female character in The Merchant of Venice is Portia. After the death of her father and having no brother, she has to play a role of a man and manage the wealthy estate. She is a rich, beautiful, and intelligent heiress of Belmont. Later in the play, she disguises herself as a man and assumes the role of a lawyer's apprentice (named Balthazar). Her power lies in her wisdom. She saves the life of Bassanio's friend, Antonio, in court from death and from Shylock's cruelty. Portia plays key role for the success of her husband Bassanio and for saving the life of her husband's friend Antonio.

Hermia is the next strong and brave female character in Shakespeare's play "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Named after the Greek god of trade, Hermes, she is a girl from ancient Athens. Hermia and her father's disagreement is the only significant one, and it is a matter of life and death. Although her father has selected Demetrius for her marriage and has appealed to Theseus, the Duke of Athens, for assistance, she still has feelings for Lysander. Hermia would have been executed or exiled to a nunnery if she had disobeyed her father's order under Athenian law. Then she bravely flees with her partner. Her poised assertiveness and resolve to take charge of her own life are what make her strong.

## II. CONCLUSION

Numerous female characters have an impact on or influence other characters in Shakespeare's plays. In Shakespeare's plays, female characters play crucial roles. They are the main characters because of their motivations. Shakespeare is the greatest representative of national life during one of its most glorious periods, and his writings are more than just the canon of beauty enthusiasts; they serve as a repository and treasury of ideas about domestic, social, civil, and political perfection that transcend national borders. "Antony and Cleopatra bears not only eloquent testimony to the profundity of his Shakespearean scholarship, but also his remarkable capacity to see a play in a broad comparative perspective," Granville Barker said of Antony and Cleopatra. This is the play with the most space. It might not have the spiritual closeness of Hamlet, the enigmatic strength of Macbeth, the nobility of Othello, or the depths or heights of King Lear, but it nevertheless has a certain beauty and charm of its own, and Shakespeare's gaze did not travel much beyond (Barker, ix). Shakespeare honors women and makes important use of them despite their relative insignificance in the patriarchal and Elizabethan social order. Despite the fact that women are frequently disregarded, Shakespeare is acutely aware of their important contributions to society, the nation, and greater creation. Shakespeare has portrayed women in his plays in a very wise, dignified, and lovely way. Because his characters are genuine to the timeless characteristics of human life and are not restricted to any modern civilization, he was not for a specific age but rather for all time. Shakespeare is the greatest representative of national life during one of its most glorious periods, and his writings are more than just the canon of beauty enthusiasts; they serve as a repository and treasury of ideas about domestic, social, civil, and political perfection that transcend national borders.

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