



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## WOMEN CHARACTERS IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS – A STUDY

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### Abstract

Shakespeare's powerful women cannot, therefore, be discussed in a social or political context, but there are many strong female characters in Shakespeare. They occasionally exert political power in the shadows by influencing their spouses to achieve a certain political goal. Shakespeare can also portray some women in a way that permits them to be regarded seriously by exploiting the Elizabethan theatre habit of women disguising themselves as men. The women always return to the traditional female role after the plays where he does that, and the resolution is marriage and declarations of their subservience to men. However, every guy in those civilizations is surrounded by women, some weak but many powerful. Even if she may be dressed in clothing that denotes her subservient status, such as head and face coverings, complete body wraps, etc., every man has a grandmother, mother, sister, or daughter who he knows to be powerful. Shakespeare's depiction of powerful women is one of his most intriguing themes. This essay focuses on 10 of the most compelling female characters from the plays he chose.

*(Keywords: Strong women, genius, society, wealth, power, intelligent, feminist)*

### 1. Introduction

Shakespeare's female characters are evidence of his brilliance. They are not drawn to hostile or patronizing personalities differ. Others are icy, aloof, and disdainful, while others are wonderful, warm, and kind. Some people speak with confidence, while others do not. From the young, happy Juliet to the seasoned, angry Margaret, they are all of the different ages. However, the majority are alive and grow and develop throughout the drama. Their acts result from a true confrontation with life as they discover what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal culture with self-sovereignty. This essay focuses on ten of the most compelling female characters from the plays.

### 2. Cordelia in King Lear

In this play, King Lear decides to retire as king and give all his lands and money to his three daughters. Based on their claims of love and affection for him, he wished to distribute his money. Goneril and Regan, the two oldest daughters, overstep the mark with their insincere remarks. According to her obligations as a daughter and the relationship between a father and daughter, Cordelia claims that she loves him. Enraged, he exiles her and tells her two prince suitors that they can take her, but not with the dowry they had anticipated. The King of France agrees to take her for herself after the Duke of Burgundy declines. She has displayed amazing bravery by challenging her father. She is with him afterward, also imprisoned; she consoles him

and nurtures him. When the other two have cruelly spurned Lear and he lies defeated and imprisoned in a dungeon, she is there. He has learned from her how a parent and daughter are connected. She has exhibited exceptional strength throughout, even when her sisters hang her. Lear passes away from heartbreak. Cordelia reveals her love through the line

"I love your Majesty

According to my bond, no more nor less" (Act I: Scene I)

### 3. Portia in Merchant of Venice

Being the only child of her deceased father and lacking a brother, Portia is exceptional in that she has had to assume the role of a male to handle the enormous estate he left her. However, he has been able to control her from beyond the dead by making a provision in his will requiring those wealthy and powerful men who come to court her from all over the world to pass a test and select from three caskets, one of which contains the approval to marry Portia. When the Duke of Venice orders a judge to preside over the case Shylock has filed against Antonio, the latter has the reluctance to provide the pound of flesh he has promised to offer. Portia appears in disguise as a well-known young judge and has exceptional talents when rendering her decision. Her strength comes from her intelligence, which is understood even by those who are unaware that she is a woman who influences everyone.

Portia gently says about Mercy -

"The quality of mercy is not strained, It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven Upon the place beneath it is twice blest; It blesseth him that gives and him that takes." (Act IV: Scene I)

### 4. Lady Macbeth in Macbeth

Lady Macbeth is viewed as a very courageous woman. In the opening act of the play, she encourages her husband Macbeth to kill Duncan, demonstrating her control over him. She makes advantage of her sexuality to mock his lack of bravery and to taunt him. His sense of duty to her is invoked by her. As he hesitates, she approaches him with increased force before he eventually moves forward. She appears to be a powerful woman, yet she lacks the psychological fortitude to deal with her guilt. They separate after their marriage breaks down. She has horrific

nightmares before deciding to end her life in the room.

Lady Macbeth advises her husband -

"Look like the innocent flower, But be the serpent under" (Act I: Scene V)

### 5. Beatrice in Much Ado About Nothing

Much Ado About Nothing is a fascinating play in which Shakespeare weaves together a tale from the annals of mythology with a wholly original modern love story. Beatrice is viewed as a strong, independent woman by everyone in her vicinity. She doesn't need to pose as a male because she is known in the family as a strong, independent lady who shouldn't be trifled with. She is quite smart and would be seen as a feminist today. She will always do what she pleases, so it is not an issue of telling her who to marry, but she despises males in any case. She particularly detests Benedick, a soldier who frequently travels to Messina and lodges in the residence of her uncle, the governor. Shakespeare created the most amazing wordplay between these two anti-marriage characters. However, their pals deceive them into believing they are in love. To exact revenge on Claudio for betraying her cousin Hero, who was due to wed him, Beatrice enlists Benedick's help in a scheme. The play finishes with the couple's choice to get married and confirmation of their love. Beatrice reverts to the stereotypical female position, but there is a distinct edge to it in her case. Shakespeare created the most amazing wordplay between these two anti-marriage characters. However, their pals deceive them into believing they are in love. To exact revenge on Claudio for betraying her cousin Hero, who was due to wed him, Beatrice enlists Benedick's help in a scheme. The play finishes with the couple's choice to get married and confirmation of their love. Beatrice reverts to the stereotypical female position, but there is a distinct edge to it in her case.

### 6. Juliet in Romeo and Juliet

Juliet would not be considered a woman in our day and age, but at the age of fourteen, her father, a wealthy businessman, is planning to exchange her for a relationship with a noble family. She is falling in love with the young Romeo as he is in the middle of that process. She just has one

thought in mind, and that is to marry Romeo. This was not her father's choice because it is against the law for their families to interact because of a long-standing feud. She declines to wed the Count of Paris without explaining her decision to her father. Her father, Capulet, finds this to be extraordinarily daring for the time and just cannot comprehend it. He curses at her, makes threats to her, and even hits her. She refuses to submit, and in her desperation to find a way out without giving up her love for Romeo, she consults Friar Lawrence. He decides to use a medicine that will make her appear dead as a solution. Romeo will arrive and remove her from the tomb when she has been laid to rest. She takes the medicine despite her fear of waking up in a tomb full of dead. She is an extremely brave and determined woman who is unquestionably one of Shakespeare's strongest female characters.

“My only love sprung from my only hate  
Too early seen unknown, and known too late”!  
(Act I: Scene v)

Juliet complains that she saw Romeo and fell in love with him “too early,” before she knew he was her enemy. Almost everything happens to Juliet too early. She is told to prepare herself for marriage before she is ready, she marries Romeo before she can get her parents’ permission, her marriage to Paris is moved forward twice, and Romeo arrives at her tomb before she has time to wake up.

## 7. Desdemona in Othello

Desdemona exhibits her fortitude at the beginning of the play when her father requests the Duke of Venice to forbid her marriage to the Moor, Othello, even though she even though when he strangles her to death. She has fallen in love with a black man, and he is against their marriage, which has already occurred in secret by that point. He has ideas about who he wants to marry her too. When the Duke asks her to explain herself, she persuades him with a stunning speech. She strikes me as a modern woman in her speech—an autonomous lady who has been a nice daughter but is now prepared to stand up for herself with her spouse. It's unfortunate if her father doesn't like that. It is no longer his concern. At that time, saying things like that in a room full of strong guys needed a great deal of strength.

“Beshrew me if I would do such a wrong  
For the whole world.” (Act IV : Scene iii)

Desdemona explains to Emilia that she would never consider being unfaithful, no matter the circumstances. The quote shows that Desdemona is so virtuous she cannot even understand why a woman would betray her husband. Desdemona’s innocence is part of her undoing because she never stops to think about how her behavior might appear to someone who is viewing it with suspicion. Instead, she assumes that everyone will see her integrity and purity.

## 8. Rosalind in As You Like It

Rosalind is the central character in the play. She is disguised as a man throughout, until the end, and can organize everyone to fit in with her needs and desires. She aims to turn the man she wants to marry into someone who can match her qualities and be as strong as she is.

The endless appeal of reading about Rosalind has much to do with her success as a knowledgeable and charming critic of herself and others. But unlike Jaques, who refuses to participate wholly in life but has much to say about the foolishness of those who surround him, Rosalind gives herself over fully to circumstance. She chastises Silvius for his irrational devotion to Phoebe, and she challenges Orlando’s thoughtless equation of Rosalind with a Platonic ideal, but still, she comes undone by her lover’s inconsequential tardiness and faints at the sight of his blood. That Rosalind can play both sides of any field makes her identifiable to nearly everyone, and so, irresistible.

“Do you not know I am a woman? When I think, I must speak. Sweet, say on”.  
(Act III: Scene ii.)

Rosalind makes this wry comment to Celia about women having no filter and blurting out every thought they have. Rosalind recently learned that Orlando has appeared in the forest of Ardenne. Overwhelmed and giddy, Rosalind asks a slew of questions about his appearance, which Celia gently mocks. Rosalind’s comment about a woman’s lack of a filter reveals not only a deprecating self-awareness but also a non-judgmental acceptance of such behavior.



## 9. Viola in Twelfth Night

After becoming shipwrecked off the coast of Illyria and losing her twin brother in the accident, Viola's first reaction is not to call for assistance as a defenseless woman, but rather to dress as a male and seek employment as a servant in the Duke's household. She can go wherever she wants since she is a man and not a child. Her strength can be shown in her capacity to adjust to her situation despite having been raised as a woman in a male-protective environment where all of her decisions were made for her. Not only does her ability to adapt reflect strength, but also her capacity to control her environment to get her own desired result, which is to marry the Duke.

"My father had a daughter loved a man / As it might be, perhaps, were I a woman / I should your lordship" (Act II: Scene. iv)

Viola hints to Orsino about her true feelings for him. Orsino does not pick up on the clues because he believes Viola is a man, and that the two of them are speaking man to man. Orsino assumes Viola is talking about a sister but the audience knows Viola is speaking about herself. However, even by disguising her comment concerning a woman, Viola comes very close here to admitting her love for Orsino, and therefore the quote has potential homoerotic connotations in that a man seems to be hinting at his love for another man.

## 10. Margaret of Anjou in four History plays

Margaret of Anjou is a character in four of Shakespeare's plays: Henry VI pts. 1, 2, 3, and Richard III. The historical Queen Margaret was the wife consort of King Henry VI of England. In Shakespeare's tetralogy, Henry is a weak king and a meek and mild man. Shakespeare's Margaret is a ruthless, ambitious, intelligent woman who dominates him completely. She becomes involved in the power games that are going on around her and takes her enemies on. She thrives in a man's world of politics and war, and even enters the battlefield in Henry VI Part 3 and stabs the Duke of York. She plays the role of a prophetess in Richard III, blaming the nobles for the demise of the House of Lancaster. Her predictions about them all come true; they are all betrayed in some fashion and are put to death.

## 11. Hermia in A Midsummer Night's Dream

After presenting her case, Helen decides to flee with Lysander rather than marry Demetrius, the man her father has picked for her. She is warned that if she does not marry Demetrius, her sentence will be death as her father begs the Duke, Theseus, to employ the full force of the law to force her to obey. Hermia challenges her father and even the most dominant man in their society, like other strong female characters in Shakespeare. She does this while maintaining her composure and using a logical argument. She then bravely flees with her partner. Her capacity for calm assertiveness and her drive to take charge of her destiny serve as her greatest assets.

"If then true lovers have been ever crossed, It stands as an edict in destiny". (Act I: Scene i)

Following the scene where Theseus issues an ultimatum and outlines Hermia's punishment if she persists in her disobedience, Hermia confesses to Lysander that fate must have doomed their love. Hermia's reference to fate and the possibility that she and Lysander are cosmically "crossed" echoes the language of *Romeo and Juliet*, the play Shakespeare wrote just before *Midsummer*. Of course, while the earlier play about "star-crossed lovers" ended tragically, this play ends happily.

## Conclusion

Shakespeare has done a good job of focusing on the female characters in his plays. He challenges the wisdom of a power structure that demands people give up their person by producing strong, attractive, independent women who we admire. Some of his plays challenge conventional ways of behaving. Some emphasize the importance of a man and a woman having respect for one another. Some portray the uncertainty a woman's mind experiences as she tries to comprehend the boundaries of her universe. Occasionally, a drama depicts the tragedy of a woman who, in her attempt to fit in, loses her identity and direction. To hear his voice, however, one must recognize the individuality and three-dimensional quality of his 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 was a sensitive artist who

lived in an era when a woman ruled England, so it seems to reason that he would have been influenced by this exceptional circumstance. Elizabeth I was not only a wonderful woman but

also a person of influence. She ruled for many years before Shakespeare was even born and far throughout his playwriting career.

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