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## William Shakespeare's Portrayal of Women: Was Shakespeare a Feminist?

William Shakespeare's representation of women, and the ways in which his female roles are interpreted and enacted, are frequently discussed topics of scholarly interest. Even though Shakespeare never really had a woman as the main center of his plays, Shakespeare's heroines encompass a wide range of characterizations and personality types, from the uncompromising frankness of Cordelia in *King Lear*, the quickwit of Kate in *Taming of the Shrew* and of Beatrice in *Much Ado about Nothing*, and the intelligence of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*. Within this gallery of female characters, critics note similarities, especially among Shakespeare's young women characters, who commonly display great intelligence, vitality, and a strong sense of personal independence. These qualities have led some critics to herald Shakespeare as an innovator who departed sharply from stereotyped characterizations of women that were common in other literature during his time period.

Contrastingly, other commentators note that even Shakespeare's most favorably portrayed women, such as Cordelia, Beatrice, Kate and Portia, possess characters that are tempered by negative qualities; all the while suggesting that the women's prominent negative qualities indicate that Shakespeare was not free of misogynistic tendencies that were deeply-rooted in the culture of his country and era. This paper will beg the question - Is William Shakespeare considered to be a feminist? The goal of this paper is to evaluate the language used in order to describe some of Shakespeare's heroines, and determine if his portrayal of women was an extremely early wave of feminism, or if Shakespeare was simply a product of his time.

According to Jill Ehnenn, author of, "An Attractive Dramatic Exhibition? Female Friendship, Shakespeare's Women, and the Female..", Shakespeare's women characters "testify to his genius as a playwright because they are drawn with neither anger nor condescension towards women as a whole.

In personality, the women characters are distinctly different and vary in personality traits. While some of the characters 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 of Romeo & Juliet to the wizened, bitter Margaret of Anjou in King Henry VI" (Ehnenn 315). In retrospect, most of Shakespeare women characters most have a caveat; they grow and develop during the course of a drama, which allows their actions to form a realistic confrontation with life as they learn the meaning of self-sovereignty and independence for a woman in an extremely patriarchal society. While Shakespeare portrayed the stereotypical representations of women in the Renaissance society through his immortal plays, he too, challenged and modified these representations by depicting women as capable of defying social norms and notions.

According to Sarah Beckwith, author of "Are There any Women in Shakespeare's Plays? Fiction, Representation, and Reality in Feminist Criticism" "Shakespeare's time, England was a highly patriarchal society. In this light, women are considered physically and emotionally weaker than men. They are bound to subject to their male counterparts as wives or daughters. According to women were expected to assume a more passive role.

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Shakespeare depicts this kind of thinking by a scene in *Romeo and Juliet* where Samson, one of Capulet's servants, remarks: "And therefore women, being the weaker vessels, are ever thrust to the wall". This line shows male dominance and female repression which caused them to be "thrust" by men. In line with society's view that women are weaker vessels, they are expected to be submissive, chaste and fine in manners. Bianca in *Taming of the Shrew* is an ideal woman in this men-dominated society, beyond her beauty and grace she was described as "a maid of mild behavior and sobriety" (Beckwith 252). Beckwith continues her argument by pointing out that women in Shakespeare's plays who conform to a patriarchal compliant image are favored and recognized. Furthermore, Shakespeare emphasized the time period's misogynistic views on women when Hamlet exclaimed: "Frailty, thy name is woman!".

Ironically, while the society disparages women for being frail in physique and intellect, it also demands them to conform such stereotype. Shakespeare seems to condemn a common traditionalist view on women by creating strong characters out of his female protagonists. For example, at some point in these women's stories, they went against the social norm and defied their male protectors. Take for example Hermia from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Despite the possibility of losing her life or being sent to the nunnery, she still refused to obey her father's will. Since the family is dominated by the males, it is but unusual for a daughter to defy her father.

Males in the family believe that their opinion is the only one that matters.

This common theme of defiance of the male head of household can be seen in Juliet and her relationship with her father, Lord Capulet, when he expressed

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such confidence when he assured Juliet's suitor, Paris, of Juliet's love.

Notwithstanding the power that males possess, Shakespeare's women were able to manifest female emancipation and resistance to established standards of conduct: for example, Jessica, in Merchant of Venice, eloped with Lorenzo, thus leaving her father, Shylock, behind. In addition, Shakespeare challenged the idea that women are unintelligent.

He modified the notion of women being intellectually inferior by creating witty characters such as Kate and Portia. In the Merchant of Venice, Portia exhibits her intellectual prowess by singlehandedly saving Antonio's life from Shylock's bond. She exhibited her brightness by ironically using the quality of mercy as an argument: "The quality of mercy is not strain'd / It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven Upon the place beneath: it is twice bless'd / It blesseth him that gives and him that takes. (IV.

I) Hence, because of Portia's extraordinary intellect, Shylock surrendered and Antonio was freed from the bond. "I take this offer then: pay the bond thrice / And let the Christian go" (IV. I). Portia's character is one that is different because she exudes intellect and knowledge in a way that makes her seem like an empowered woman. She dresses up as a man in order to save her beloved's best friend and thus shows the versatility for Shakespeare and his writings to create a complex character that completely defies the societal norms at the time. Portia in the Merchant of Venice is undoubtedly a character that can be classified as a feminist in modern standards.

Conclusively, Shakespeare was able to show the different facets of women during his time. His female protagonists are not the insipid and uneducated

type's common in a patriarchal society, but instead are interesting, witty and intelligent. It's not therefore surprising that Shakespeare's plays are revered up to this moment.

Remarkable, indeed, that amidst a society where women are not supposed to speak and be heard, Shakespeare gave them voice