

# Representation of women in renaissance drama english literature essay

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



I believe it is also important to note that even though the actors performing were male, the theatre would have also been for the entertainment of women; the feminine gender was therefore displayed through costumes. The theatre was not intended to portray women as pathetic and helpless, after all the country was run by a female, Queen Elizabeth I. Phyllis Rackin describes how the theatre provided an arena where changing gender definitions could be displayed, deplored, or enforced and where anxieties about them could be expressed by playwrights and incited or repressed among their audiences. I would suggest this was Shakespeare's aim. He wanted to explore the feminine gender, their roles in society as well as the cultural response towards them, without simply portraying them as helpless victims. This is instantly demonstrated in the opening scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; where Shakespeare portrays Hermia as a developed female character, rather than a pathetic possession. He presents a headstrong woman who is restrained by society. Egeus attempts to keep his daughter Hermia under his possession, he describes her as a 'form of wax'; Here Egeus is objectifying his daughter as 'wax', which is purely a substance. He also states 'As she is mine, I may dispose of her' (1. 1. 42). The use of the word 'dispose' aligns Hermia with an object that can just be thrown away. Egeus would rather have his daughter killed than let her marry the man she loves. He is trying to not only control his daughter's emotional life but also her sexual one as well, as she would have to 'endure the livery of a nun' (1. 1. 70). The use of 'nun' clearly signifies a lonely life for Hermia without a husband or children. The audience however cannot take Egeus' predicament seriously as there is no difference in wealth between Lysander and

Demetrius; so instead we align with headstrong Hermia, who will not fall victim to her father dictations. By not giving up her virginity to someone she doesn't love, she illustrates the power of female sexuality. Even though the play contains powerful emotions the comical representation reminds audiences it is a comedy. If Shakespeare wanted to portray a helpless victim surely Hermia would instantly marry Demetrius; instead he illustrates the social constraints as well as portraying a courageous woman, who is willing to run away. The fact that Demetrius that is following Hermia clearly shows she is not a weak woman, and he is in fact helpless because she won't love him. A comical effect is created when Hermia goes against expectations of her fearful predicament and instead says 'O hell, to choose love by another's eyes!' (1. 1. 140). The repetition of 'O' when she replies to Lysander with 'O cross!', 'O spite!' and 'O hell!' depicts how she will not give him up. A similar situation is presented in Thomas Dekker's comedy, *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, where Rose's father similarly interferes by pointing out that 'Too mean is my poor girl for this high birth' (1. 1. 11); his daughter cannot be with her lover Lacy because she is from a lower class. Shakespeare was not the only writer to represent society; Dekker also tried to portray the treatment of women within his play. In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hermia is not the only strong female within the play; Titania also illustrates power and the strength of female relationships (despite being a fairy). In Act 2 Scene 1 she justifies to her husband Oberon why she should keep the orphan, she states '[...] for her sake do I rear up her boy, / And for her sake I will not part with him.' (2. 1. 136-137) Titania's relationship with the orphan's mother appears to mean more to her than the

one with her husband. Titania challenges her husband unlike the traditional Elizabethan wife, creating a balance between male and female. In Act 2 Scene 1 the audience are presented with Oberon, questioning her duty to him; he asks 'Tarry, rash wanton. Am not I thy lord?' (2. 1. 49); the use of 'wanton' referring to her impulsive behaviour for foreswearing 'his bed and company.' (2. 1. 63) Titania then accuses him of having another lover, Hippolyta; again illustrating a head strong, courageous female. One must note that Titania's power is also reflected in the structure of the play, where Titania amongst other females drive the play forward in acting courageous against dictating males. Titania also describes how Oberon's 'forgeries of jealousy' are stopping her from seeing other fairies, perhaps implicating that if men were not in the world, disturbing the peace then society would be a happy place. It could be said that the attitudes of men in Elizabethan society caused women to be condemned and perceived as helpless victims. Simone de Beauvoir describes in 'Woman and the Other' a typical male perception of women stating that: Humanity is male and man defines woman not herself but as relative to him... she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute- she is the Other. This is exactly how Oberon perceives his wife; she is an object to him, but she is strong enough to fight back. Oberon is perceived by audiences as being in the wrong for demanding the child from Titania; after all she has cared for him since his mother passed away. It could therefore be interpreted that in Shakespeare's plays it is the men who are weak for taking their own faults out on their women. This is also the case in Shakespeare's tragedy Hamlet. In Act 3 Scene 1 Hamlet criticises women for bringing out the faults in men.

He uses make-up to suggest women paint their faces to disguise the ugly, which also acts as a metaphor to suggest that women are dishonest, but hide it well. He states ' I have heard of your paintings too, well enough. God/ has given you one face and you make yourselves another.' He believes that her deception ' hath made [him]... mad' (3. 1. 146). It is important to remember that this conversation is a test of Hamlet's insanity; the audience are aware from Claudis's and Polonius's ' withdraw[al]' (3. 1. 57) earlier on in the scene, that they are watching Hamlet. This leaves the audience questioning, is Hamlet just acting mad or is he truly insane? Are these his true feelings for Ophelia even though he may only be acting? I believe he is purely blaming Ophelia for his own faults; he has lost his father and doesn't know how to deal with it. Linda Bambe in her book *Comic Women, Tragic Men* describes how ' The hero's view of women reaches bottom at the moment when he is out of control of himself and his world.' This undoubtedly could be the case; and could be a reason behind the mistreatment of women in Elizabethan society. It is easy to blame the people closest to you and consequently as a form of punishment the women became objects to their men. I would go as far to say that it was the men who were helpless victims, and dealt with it by condemning women; women were therefore essentially microcosms of a confused society. Hamlet's mother Gertrude stems his torment, as she seems to have no control over herself. His father has died and his mother has instantly fallen for his uncle. The audience gets a sense of how quickly Gertrude has moved on, when Hamlet describes how the ' The funeral baked meats/ Did coldly furnish the marriage tables.' (1. 2. 179-180) He jokes that the food from his father's funeral could also cater for the

wedding. Hamlet is so disgusted with his mother, that he distances himself from her; this is clearly depicted through the use of a third person narrative. Gertrude therefore has power over Hamlet her actions are controlling his mind, feelings and actions. On the other hand Gertrude could be interpreted as 'helpless' because she clearly can't be without a man. Shakespeare depicts how women enabled men to have a sense of power. In Titus Andronicus he uses powerful imagery of Lavinia's body as a 'changing piece' to show how different men try to possess her. In the opening of the play Titus perceives his daughter as his possession as she is chaste. Bassianus and Saturninus desire Lavinia as she is 'Rome's rich ornament' (1. 1. 52); she is chaste, she is the daughter of Titus (the potential emperor) and no one in society seems to question her virtue. Therefore any man that makes her his wife is going to have the power of ownership, by taking her valued virginity, and will be a step closer to power if he marries the daughter of the likely next emperor. Lavinia illustrates the virtue of women by being silent. In the opening act Saturninus claims her for himself, stating 'Lavinia will I make my empress' (1. 1. 240), the audience are aware she is on stage but she remains silent. She has the power to give any of the three men the power of ownership, she could remain chaste and therefore remain the property of Titus or she could marry Bassianus or Saturninus. Her silence leaves the audience unable to know for sure her feelings towards Saturninus. As a chaste woman she is valuable in society. Shakespeare then depicts what could happen if women were to forget their virtues, so creates a social disorder through the rape of Lavinia in the Act 2. In this act Shakespeare represents a three-dimension character, audiences learn that Lavinia is not

all perfect and consequently her vile language ends up in her losing her whole identity. Whereas previous Lavinia was virtuous and decided to remain silent, here she illustrates that she does have the power to speak. Lavinia says to Tamora '[...] you have a goodly gift in horning' (2. 3. 67). The footnote informs readers that 'horning' refers to 'The husbands of unfaithful women were supposed to grow staglike horns' (p. 425). Lavinia is calling Tamora an adulterous. She is then raped and a stage direction in the next scene informs readers that she has had 'her hands cut off and her tongue cut out, and ravished' (2. 4). I would suggest that the mutilation of her body is a literary device rather than an actual mutilation depicting Lavinia's loss of power. In the opening of the play she could choose if wanted to speak, now she is unable to. She had her virginity now it has been taken away. Her body now symbolises a shameful female in Elizabethan society. The rape also signifies the social and political disorder in this period, where virginity was a contradiction. Men wanted women untouched, by their essential aim was to gain power through taking a woman's virginity. Sexual appetite however would have played on a man's anxiety, because women would have a sense of control. I would suggest Shakespeare uses shocking imagery of Lavinia to educate women into acting virtuous as a warning that society will change them into 'helpless victims'. The power of this scene would however depend on the directorial representation of Lavinia. Directors may choose to depict a strong woman still trying to fight back despite the rape and mutilation; others may choose to make her a fragile female, who accepts defeat and the loss of her identity. I would also like to make reference to Thomas Kyd's representation of Bel-Imperia in *The Spanish Tragedy*; as it is similar to

Shakespeare's depiction of Lavinia and Tamora. Bel-imperia has the same qualities of Lavinia in the opening of 'Titus Andronicus', she is chaste and is highly valued by men in society for this. However like Tamora, she seeks revenge; Balthazar's reasoning behind the killing of Horatio is because '[...] Balthazar loves Bel-imperia.' The audience are later presented with Bel-imperia taking Balthazar's life as well as her own to escape male manipulation. Her end shows the strength of her complex character for being able to kill, yet also is tragic because it was the only way she could escape. To conclude, I would like to agree with R. S White's description that: 'A dramatist's job is to give voices to opposing moral viewpoints [...].'

Shakespeare, Kyd and Dekkar all challenge society, whilst allowing their audiences to witness the objectification of women. These women were exploited in society and were always inferior to men except for Queen Elizabeth of course. They create dimensional female characters to depict that women too were in fact powerful too; it was society that constrained them. Women in these plays don't simply appear as helpless victims they show courage, personality and are undoubtedly head strong. The women are restrained by society but fight for their desires. But unfortunately because of the patriarchal society women always end up as 'helpless victims'. I therefore believe the female gender acts as a microcosm of the tragic world outside. It has to be considered that these writers may have been too scared to let women be victorious in the end, or perhaps they simply wanted to portray a realistic overview of the society they lived in. But, within these plays one thing is certain, the female characters were gaining real



personalities and illustrated that they would no longer allow themselves to be pure possessions of men.