

Women in Shakespeare's Writing

The majority of Shakespeare's major female characters are young and involved in romantic plots that revolve around choosing a husband. The conflict between a father and daughter regarding who represents an ideal suitor had the potential to create serious quarrels in families, and Shakespeare repeatedly stages such quarrels in his writing. Two of Shakespeare's tragedies begin with the struggle of a young female character to free herself from male control. In [Romeo and Juliet](#), Juliet sneaks out of her home to marry Romeo, and then fakes her own death to escape the husband her father has chosen for her.

In [Othello](#), Desdemona also sneaks out at night to marry the man she has chosen against her father's wishes. Although these heroines free themselves from their fathers, they do not free themselves from male control altogether. Juliet loses her chosen husband when he is drawn into the ongoing feud between the men of the Capulet and Montague families.

Desdemona remains faithful to Othello, but her history of defying male authority makes him anxious. He comes to suspect her of adultery and ultimately murders her.

Whereas Shakespeare's tragedies usually feature women in secondary roles, or roles that share top billing with a man (like Juliet or Cleopatra), Shakespeare's comedies often feature women as main characters. [As You Like It](#), [A Midsummer Night's Dream](#), [Much Ado About Nothing](#), and [Twelfth Night](#) all center on young women determined to choose their own husbands or, like Olivia in [Twelfth Night](#) and Beatrice in [Much Ado About Nothing](#),

determined not to marry at all. Like the tragedies, these plays show that the apparent ability to choose a husband or to avoid marriage does not amount to much freedom after all. In the end, both Olivia and Beatrice are persuaded to marry. Likewise, both Rosalind in [As You Like It](#) and Viola in [Twelfth Night](#) don disguises and enjoy comic adventures that come to an end once they take off their costumes, get married, and begin new lives in their roles as wives. [The Merchant of Venice](#) offers a slightly more empowering ending. In that play Portia and Nerissa disguise themselves as men and test their new husbands by tricking them into giving up their wedding rings, a symbolic gesture which suggests both women intend to exercise power within their marriages.

Women dress up as men in many of Shakespeare's plays, often as a dramatic device to further the plot. By making his female characters cross-dress, Shakespeare gave himself the opportunity to put them in situations from which real-life women would have been barred. In [Twelfth Night](#), for instance, Viola disguises herself as the young man "Cesario" and offers to help Duke Orsino woo Countess Olivia, something a noblewoman would never have been allowed to do. Elizabethans largely believed that women lacked the intelligence, rationality, courage, and other qualities necessary to perform roles reserved for men. However, whenever Shakespeare's cross-dressing women take on traditionally male roles, they usually do a better job than their male counterparts. In [The Merchant of Venice](#), none of the male characters can think of a way to rescue Antonio from a contract that allows the moneylender Shylock to take "a pound of flesh" from his body. But when Portia arrives in court disguised as a lawyer, she demonstrates a legal savvy that no other male character possesses. Portia brilliantly points out that Shylock may be legally entitled to a pound of Antonio's flesh, but that "no jot of blood" can be spilled in the process.

Although shrewd young women appear frequently in Shakespeare's plays, mature women are conspicuously absent. Mothers in particular are missing. In [The Tempest](#), Prospero lives

alone with his daughter Miranda as castaways on a remote island. When Prospero gives an account of their escape from Milan, he only references her mother once, and only in order to confirm that Miranda is indeed his daughter: "Thy mother was a piece of virtue / And she said thou wast my daughter" (I.ii.). Mothers are missing in plays from across Shakespeare's career, from [Titus Andronicus](#) to [King Lear](#), and like [The Tempest](#), many of these plays focus intensely on the relationships between fathers and daughters. Two notable exceptions to the rule of missing mothers include Gertrude in [Hamlet](#) and Volumnia in [Coriolanus](#), both of whom have difficult relationships with their adult sons. The example of Gertrude also points to Shakespeare's tendency to present mature women as being devious, even dangerous. Hamlet believes his mother to be complicit with the king's assassination. Lady Macbeth provides another example of a devious older woman. Cleopatra may offer the only example of a powerful, mature woman whom Shakespeare portrays as being noble and dignified.