

# Dissertation Title: The Significance of the female voice within William Shakespeare's Plays

## Introduction

This thesis will focus its attention on the presence of the female voice within the plays by William Shakespeare within the sixteenth and early seventeenth century. This discussion will focus primarily on plays such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Hamlet*. This is not an exclusive list of the plays included but merely the main focuses due to their strong female characters. Comparisons will be made with other females in other plays to provide diverse and contrasting arguments for the female voice within Shakespeare's body of work. This thesis will present the strong part the female voice and presence has within the plays and their contribution as a whole. The women within the plays portray a significant role in the progression of the narrative and story of the play and are essential to the reality and the captivation of the audience within the play. This argument will consider both the contemporary perceptions of the plays as well as the literature reviews of them through secondary material, to determine how the female voice and characters are understood and interpreted by those engaged with the performances and narrative of the plays.

A key piece of secondary literature that is significant for the purpose of this study is Neely's on *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*.<sup>1</sup> Neely argues that "Shakespeare's plays reflect this misogyny; his treatment of strong women reflects patriarchal anxieties, and his admirable heroines fit the "saving stereotypes" which the period created of patient, chaste, long-suffering, self-martyring women."<sup>2</sup> Neely's argument suggests that the women in Shakespeare's plays are used to represent the social ideals and transgressions of the period. There were expectations of what a woman should be and how they should act in the early modern period and that the women demonstrate polar opposites of these ideals. Some women in his play for example Lady Macbeth present how women should not act and how they shouldn't transgress as these actions can cause insanity and unwomanly characteristics. Lady Macbeth exceeds what a woman was expected to do and be as a woman in the era, but at a cost demonstrating the social anxieties of men in the time and their view on overbearing women. Similarly, Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* is seen as an unconventional woman of the period, dismissing potential suitors when in reality women had to marry to ensure security for themselves and often marriage matches were arranged by the father's and Portia would have had no choice to dismiss the marriage proposal. Portia and Lady Macbeth are proof of Neely's arguments that there is a negative treatment of strong women in the play, in an attempt to discourage women from the time period to act in such ways.

In contrast, Neely's argument that the admirable heroines present the chaste and patient women that society desired women to be can be seen as portrayed through female characters such as Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Whilst, Beatrice at first appears independent and strong willed, in the end she is happy to find love and be a loving wife making her a true heroine in early modern terms. Whilst it is important to acknowledge the ideals of women

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<sup>1</sup> Neely, C. T. (1985). *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*. United States: University of Illinois Press.

<sup>2</sup> Neely, C. T. (1985). *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*. United States: University of Illinois Press, p.21.

during the period in which Shakespeare's plays were first seen, it is also essential to recognise the use of the female characters in the plays to convey the male view and opinion of women, rather than the female voice itself. The female characters in Shakespeare's plays are presented through Shakespeare's and society's expectations on women, rather than women conveying their own feelings and viewpoints. As society was traditionally patriarchal in nature, women were perceived how men wanted them to be. This can clearly be interpreted in the plays and as Neely suggests reflects a tone of misogyny within its nature. Themes of gender representation and the differences between men and women are key to this study.

Gender studies and the history of gender perceptions are essential to the study of this topic. Sonya O. Rose argues that "Gender history is based on the fundamental idea that what it means to be defined as man or woman has a history"<sup>3</sup> and indeed gender perceptions and social constructs of gender stereotypes are and have been the primary way of understanding how gender has been perceived throughout history and how it is perceived by the contemporary audience. The use of the term "gender" rather than "sex" to define the differences of people in society is also relative to this as it adds a flexibility to the definitions of what it means to be male or female in both modern and previous societies. Therefore, it is important to understand society's perceptions on gender and sex in the early modern period where Shakespeare's plays were performed to understand why the female voice in the plays is conveyed the way it is.

There is a common perception of how Early Modern men and women were supposed to be, act and dress. This can be derived from such early modern surviving evidence like the documents *Hic Mulier* and *Haec-Vir* which are sources that fundamentally explain how the two genders in early medieval society were perceived and expected to behave<sup>4</sup>. Sandra Clark argues that "From the earliest satire against women in English, the subject of women's clothes has always been a popular butt for attack. Love of fine clothing links conveniently with two of the most fruitful themes of misogyny: the lustful nature of the female sex and the pleasure women take in abusing and begging their menfolk with extravagant demands."<sup>5</sup> This suggests that early modern men were displeased with how English women in particular behaved and how this did not conform to the social norms and expectations of a patriarchal lead society. This societal expectation is presented in Shakespeare's plays primarily through its female characters.

The study of gender, female voices and expression as well as discussion of society's perceptions of women expressed in Shakespeare's plays will all be examined and presented within the next few chapters, to establish the presence of women within Shakespeare's writings and plays.

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<sup>3</sup> Rose, Sonya O. (2013). *What is Gender History*. Polity Press. p.2.

<sup>4</sup> *Hic Mulier: Or, the Man-woman and Haec-vir: Or, the Womanish-man*. (1973). United Kingdom: Rota at the University of Exeter.

<sup>5</sup> Clark, Sandra "'Hic Mulier,' 'Haec Vir,' and the Controversy over Masculine Women. (1985) *Studies in Philology*, vol. 82, no. 2., pp. 157–183.

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