



**Shakespeare's influence to theater: The evolving portrayal of women characters**  
Shanzhi Weng

## Introduction

In the early 15th to 17th centuries in England, theater grew to be an important art form in the country, spreading beliefs, culture, and societal attitudes. However, despite its importance and influence, women were forbidden to perform onstage. Theaters tended to hire young male actors to play their roles, while women stayed backstage working on costumes or performing in private performances in country homes, away from the public.<sup>10</sup> Onstage, female characters were stereotyped as symbols of sexuality, weak, or even clingy. However, this situation was changed by a famous playwright, William Shakespeare. Shakespeare's portrayal of women in plays challenged society, gender norms and paved the way for women to gain access to the stage. Shakespeare's portrayal of women not only redefined their roles in theater but also influenced how the country views gender norms.

## Backgrounds

Interestingly, the prohibition of women in theater dates back to Ancient Greece.<sup>8</sup> In Ancient Greece, surprisingly, women primarily worshipped Dionysus, the god of ecstasy. They performed these rites by dancing and pounding drums to create a performance for the god.<sup>5</sup> Ironically, when these rites evolved into theater, women were banished and their parts were taken by men. The Greeks believed that allowing women to perform publicly would be too dangerous.<sup>8</sup> This is due to women's low social status and lack of public rights at that time. Having them perform onstage might challenge society to accept women's participation in public. The English adopted this tradition of not allowing women to perform on stage. Although there was no law prohibiting English women from acting, the general public believed women onstage to be indecent.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, while women were not allowed to perform in theaters, they were allowed to be in other private forms of performances, such as masques and country house entertainments.<sup>10</sup> In country houses and private homes, the performances were amateur and not for profit.<sup>10</sup> Private performances were exclusive, which could avoid the risk of public exposure. These private performances avoided the chance for women to speak their minds and give women power, which others deemed dangerous to society. However, because women could only perform in the private sphere, their voices were limited.

In Ancient Greek theater, women were often portrayed as being weak and eager for protection. They were viewed as properties for their husbands and fathers, and with a heart full of nothing but fear. On the contrary, men were portrayed with all the positive traits: courage, intelligence, and power. It seemed that men were capable of everything, from carrying small responsibilities to being heroes. This did not apply to women. In Greek mythology, Medea, the daughter of King Aetes of Colchis, has the name associated with cunning, and is also a word that represents the Greeks' greatest enemy. By putting this negative connotation on a woman, it reinforced the negative stereotypes of women, and strengthened the patriarchal beliefs of Ancient Greek society.

## Outlook

Contrary to earlier theater forms, Shakespeare broke these constraints by creating female characters who were bold, intelligent, and brave. When society depicted women as vain, pretentious, and ignorant, Shakespeare's works showed that women can be strong, witty, powerful, and independent. In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth defied gender norms, demanding "Unsex me here."<sup>8</sup> She threw away "feminine qualities" to commit a murder, being braver than Macbeth, and even mocked his cowardice. Independent and fierce female characters were rare back then, and Lady Macbeth defied the traditional idea of women. Similarly, Juliet from *Romeo and Juliet* displayed courage in defying social norms. Women in early centuries were expected to serve their family, their education was not advocated, and they could not speak out against the patriarchal system.<sup>7</sup> But Juliet's bravery was in the pursuit of her own will — to be with Romeo. Her will was strong enough that she faked her death and tried to run away from her own family. She refused to go on the established path that her family had decided for her. Juliet's actions challenged the low social status of women at that time. These two characters by Shakespeare did not follow the common portrayal of women, the nubile woman or old hag,<sup>3</sup> but instead showcased women as leaders and strategic fighters. Shakespeare's portrayals demonstrated that women could drive narratives, not just serve as plot development.

After the English Civil War and King Charles II's exile to France, the Puritans banned theater, specifically in London.<sup>9</sup> They believed it would spread evil thoughts and lead to events that would disrupt social order. Part of the reason is that the Puritans believed plays promote sinful behaviors as lechery and prostitution, and distract from their religious duties to God.<sup>10</sup> Once the exile of King Charles II was over, one of his first acts was to oppose the theater ban in England.<sup>10</sup> Being deeply influenced by French theater, he wanted England to be able to produce good arts just like France. He issued royal patents to Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant, playwrights in the early centuries, to open theaters — the King's Company and the Duke's Company.<sup>9</sup> He also announced a new policy that women were allowed to participate and perform in theaters. This decision was also likely influenced by his mother, Queen Henrietta Maria, who came from France. She had performed in masques such as *The Shepherd's Paradise*, a play that shows female strength, autonomy, and confidence, like the works of Shakespeare.<sup>15</sup>

Eventually on December 8, 1660, Margaret Hughes became the first woman to perform professionally onstage. She played the character Desdemona in Shakespeare's play *Othello*, at King's company in London.<sup>9</sup> Her individual performance proved that women have the passion and the talent to represent themselves, rather than letting men portray an "ideal" version of them. When Margaret Hughes stepped on stage, the audience saw a "real woman" for the first time. The theater shifted from a place of male imagination to portrayal of reality. Moreover, being the first woman on stage was more than just a job. It was about bravery. Women like Margaret Hughes were willing to risk their reputations to prove that women are not incapable, and to lead the rebellion toward gender domination.

Shakespeare's work impacted countless playwrights after him, such as the Spanish playwright Pedro Calderon de la Barca. In his play, *La Dama Duende*, the female character Dona Angela is a widow who defied her brother's control to reclaim her autonomy. Dona Angela was controlled

by her brothers after her husband's death and forced to live in a castle with them secretly, so they could keep her under their eyes and control her.<sup>8</sup> However, she expressed, "God help me! I am dying entombed by these four walls. The sun hardly knows of my existence".<sup>8</sup> She claimed that her brothers trapped her, like animals in a cage, with no freedom and no right to leave the place. She did not want to spend her life like this. She connected with the owner of the castle and secretly sneaked out with his help. She was portrayed as clever and active. Refusing to be controlled, Dona Angela rebelled against the confinement placed on widows, eager to shape her own life.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, her characterization as a clever woman who rebels against society echoed Shakespeare's revolutionary characters. Like Lady Macbeth, Dona Angela exhibits astute and calculative strategies. In Calderon de la Barca's writings, the similarities in women challenging confinement rather than conforming to the archetypes of the "nubile woman" or "old hag" reflected a deep influence from Shakespeare's writings.

Shakespeare's creation of intellectual and revolutionary female characters deeply changed the theatrical landscape, providing a blueprint that writers later used to challenge societal norms. One piece that was influenced was Frances Brooke's *The History of Emily Montague*, written in 1769. This piece told the story of a young woman who refused to conform to societal expectations and chose to pursue her own ambitions.<sup>13</sup> Emily refused to commit to her assigned marriage and used her intelligence to make her way out of the situation. This play helped to challenge traditional notions of the role of women in society. This character was similar to Shakespeare's Beatrice, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, who always argued with Benedict. She was always straightforward and would not let other people make fun of her or look down on her. She was strong enough to defend and protect herself. As a result, Beatrice has been embraced as a feminist icon, celebrated for her refusal to conform.<sup>15</sup> This similarity in portrayal of women shows that the belief of how women should be has slowly changed over time. Art works are the closest ways to display a culture's moral values and their beliefs. When change is happening in theater, that means the society's thinking is also changing. With Shakespeare's groundbreaking and rebellious women characters, the change in belief system is finally occurring.

Furthermore, the French playwright Moliere adopted Shakespeare's themes and language in his works. An example of this influence is the similarity between one line from Shakespeare's comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and a line in Moliere's play, *Tartuffe*. In Shakespeare's play, a character expressed confusion by saying "I am amazed and know not what to say". While Moliere showed a character's disbelief by saying "I am amazed and don't know what to say."<sup>14</sup> By using nearly identical words, Moliere shows that Shakespeare's way of writing remained as a model, and the standard for playwrights. And the fact that Moliere's play was written over fifty years later than *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, proves that Shakespeare's influence continued over time.

Historically, women's behaviors were strictly controlled by society, and these rules were eventually challenged by theater. In the 1600s, women were expected to be quiet and homebound, and the law forbidden them from acting professionally. Because men played all the women roles in theater, what was on stage was how society thinks an "ideal woman" should be like, rather than their real behavior. While men dress like women on stage, women get arrested for dressing like a man in public. During the 1700s, women strongly rebelled against this ridiculous norm. In London, United Kingdom, a woman named Mary Frith became famous for



wearing men's clothes in public.<sup>11</sup> The action's goal was to show that women are capable of doing things that men were allowed to do, and women should not be seen as the weaker gender. She was seen as a threat to gender hierarchies, and to the dominant control of men. Theater acted as a powerful spark that evoked women's passion to challenge their "quiet" roles, and stand up for themselves. Seeing the inaccuracy of women's behavior in theater inspired women to realize that they do not have to live up to the strict, and false belief rules.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, William Shakespeare's portrayal of women was revolutionary, moving beyond the idea of "nubile woman" or "old hag." He gifted the theater with new ideas and chances — the intelligent and agentive women, through the ambition of Lady Macbeth, the sharp wit of Beatrice, and Viola's bravery to disguise herself as a man. Shakespeare challenged the foundations of how society viewed women's capabilities and responsibilities. His work influenced the Restoration's acceptance of actresses performing on stage, allowing female actors to give voice to other powerful roles. Furthermore, he inspired writers from his period to the modern, pushing boundaries of women's representation. William Shakespeare contributed to theater by not only using it as a tool to spread news, but also to introduce a new world where people do not need to be defined by societal norms and where women can live their lives as they want. His plays forever changed the narrative of women not only on stage, but also in society.



## References

1. Clark, Nick, and Nick Smurthwaite. (2020, April 22). *From Pandemics to Puritans. Opera HollandPark*, [operahollandpark.com/news/chorus-magazine-from-pandemics-to-puritans-when-theater-shut-down-through-history-and-how-it-recovered/](https://operahollandpark.com/news/chorus-magazine-from-pandemics-to-puritans-when-theater-shut-down-through-history-and-how-it-recovered/).
2. [Emothe.uv.es](https://emothe.uv.es). (2025). *The Phantom Lady [La Dama Duende] / Pedro Calderón de La Barca: Tra.* /textosEMOTHE/EMOTHE0679\_ThePhantomLady.php. Accessed 17 Sept. 2025.
3. [Encyclopedia.com](https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/women-16th-17th-and-18th-centuries-introduction). (2019). *Women in the 16th, 17th, and 18th Centuries: Introduction* <https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/women-16th-17th-and-18th-centuries-introduction>
4. Gewertz, K. (2004, July 17) "When Men Were Men (and Women, Too):" *Harvard Gazette*, [news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2003/07/when-men-were-men-and-women-too/](https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2003/07/when-men-were-men-and-women-too/).
5. Hu, Yaoheng. (2016). *England:1500-1660*. Western Theater History, 1st ed., Sanmin Bookstore.
6. Jason. (2025, June 17). *Dionysius and the Bacchae: The God of Ecstasy. Storytelling DB* <https://storytellingdb.com/dionysius-bacchae-ecstasy/>
7. Moraes, Frank. (2013, April 5). *Were Women Allowed to Act in the Theater in the Shakespearean Era?* <https://franklycurious.com/wp/2013/04/05/were-women-allowed-to-act-in-the-theater-in-the-shakespearean-era/>
8. MyShakespeare. (2016, May 2). *Act 1, Scene 5*. [myshakespeare.com/macbeth/act-1-scene-5](https://myshakespeare.com/macbeth/act-1-scene-5).
9. RoyalShakespearCompany. *WomenonStage*. [www.rsc.org.uk/shakespeares-life-and-times/women-on-stage](https://www.rsc.org.uk/shakespeares-life-and-times/women-on-stage).
10. Steinway, E. (2022, March 21). *Why Weren't Women Allowed to Act in Shakespeare's Plays?* SOURCE. <https://source.colostate.edu/why-werent-women-allowed-to-act-in-shakespeare-s-plays/>
11. "The Official William Shakespeare Page | the Tradition of Men Portraying Women on Public Stages Dates back to the Theatre of the Ancient Greeks, and Is Present in Several Other Theatrical Tra... | Facebook." *Facebook.com*, Facebook Groups, 2026, [www.facebook.com/groups/452769566054770/posts/12152336464741021/](https://www.facebook.com/groups/452769566054770/posts/12152336464741021/).
12. University of Nevada, Las Vegas. (2015, Sept 24). *Much Ado about Women's Rights*. [www.unlv.edu/news/article/much-ado-about-womens-rights](https://www.unlv.edu/news/article/much-ado-about-womens-rights).
13. Upenn. (2024) *TheHistoryofEmilyMontague* . [edudigital.library.upenn.edu/women/brooke/emily/emily.html](https://edudigital.library.upenn.edu/women/brooke/emily/emily.html).



14. Wikipedia Contributors. "Representation of Women in Athenian Tragedy." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 21 May 2019, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Representation\\_of\\_women\\_in\\_Athenian\\_tragedy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Representation_of_women_in_Athenian_tragedy).
15. Wikipedia Contributors. (2025, May 3) *The Shepherd's Paradise*. *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation.