

The lives of women in Shakespeare's England

Vocabulary bank

patriarchy: a society in which men hold the power

Shakespearean England was a patriarchy; men held the power and women were expected to be obedient and submissive.

gender norms: the behaviours and attitudes expected from each gender in a society

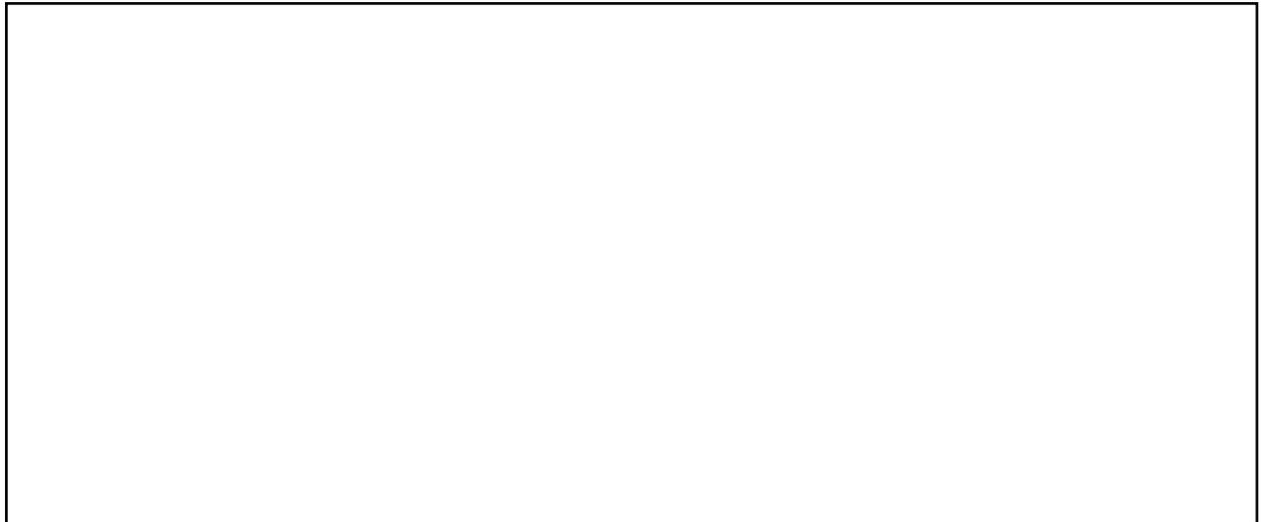
Shakespeare uses his female characters to explore and critique the gender norms of the period; we see women who are confined and oppressed by their male counterparts, as well as those who challenge them.

subvert: to undermine the power and authority of an established system

In assuming a sense of autonomy, Shakespeare's female characters often subvert the expectations of their patriarchal society.

Starter Activity

In the box below, create a mind-map of everything you know about what life was like for women in Shakespearean England. How does the role of women in Shakespearean society link to the text you have studied?



Life for women in Shakespeare's England

In Shakespeare's England, women's lives were heavily controlled by the patriarchal society. Women were not allowed to attend school or university, which hugely limited their access to work beyond domestic roles and were not allowed to vote or purchase property. Women were encouraged to be obedient to male authority; fathers tended to have control over who they married and passed legal control of them to their husbands. There was also a huge disparity in terms of expected behaviour between the genders; women were expected to be submissive and sexually pure whereas men were expected to be dominant and promiscuity went unchallenged.

Task: Who are the female characters in the text you are studying? What are they like? How might these characters reflect the gender norms of the time?

Queen Elizabeth I was Queen of England from 1558 to 1603. As the monarch for the majority of Shakespeare's life and the most superior authority in English society at the time, her influence on his social and political context is significant. One of the most notable events in her reign was the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, after which she famously said: 'I have the body of a weak and feeble woman but I have the heart and stomach of a king', reflecting her desire to establish her strength as a leader. She never married, as such she inspired a cult of virginity. She repeatedly insisted that she was married to her kingdom and subjects, but the 'Marriage Question' was a key political issue of the era which highlighted society's expectations of women in 16th century England, regardless of their role in society.

Task: How does Elizabeth I's reign relate to the female characters in the play you have studied?

Exploring Shakespearean attitudes towards women: John Knox

In 1558, Scottish reformer John Knox wrote *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women*, a polemical work which attacks female monarchs by arguing that female rule is blasphemous. At the time of its publication, Queen Elizabeth I ruled England and Mary Queen of Scots ruled Scotland; he fled to mainland Europe. Whilst extreme, his writing reflects the endemic misogyny which characterised Shakespearean England and offers a contemporary perspective on the role of women in 16th century English society.

Task: Read and discuss the extracts from *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women*².

Extract 1: THE DECLAMATION

To promote a Woman to bear rule, superiority, dominion or empire above any realm, nation or city is

A. Repugnant to nature.

B. Contumely to God.

C. The subversion of good order, of all equity and justice.

A. Men illuminated only by the light of nature have seen and determined that it is a thing most repugnant to nature, that Women rule and govern over men.

B. Woman in her greatest perfection was made to serve and obey man, not to rule and command him. After the fall, she was made subject to man by the irrevocable sentence of God. In which sentence there are two parts.

(a) A dolour, anguish and pain as oft as ever she shall be a mother.

(b) A subjection of her self, her appetites and will to her husband and his will.

C. The Empire of a Woman is a thing repugnant to justice, and the destruction of every commonwealth where it is received.

(a) If justice be a constant and perpetual will to give to every person their own right: then to give or to will to give to any person that which is not their right, must repugn to justice. But to reign above Man can never be the right to Woman: because it is a thing denied unto her by God, as is before declared.

(b) Whatsoever repugneth to the will of God expressed in His most sacred word, repugneth to justice. That Women have authority over Men repugneth to the will of God expressed in His word. Therefore all such authority repugneth to justice.

Extract 2: THE FIRST BLAST TO AWAKE WOMEN DEGENERATE

To promote a woman to beare rule, superioritie, dominion or empire above any realme, nation, or citie, is repugnant to nature, contumelie to God, a thing most contrarious to his reveled will and approved ordinance, and finallie it is the subuersion of good order, of all equitie and iustice

In the probation of this proposition, I will not be so curious, as to gather what soeuer may amplifie, set furth, or decore the same, but I am purposed, euen as I haue spoken my conscience in most plaine and fewe wordes, so to stand content with a simple prooffe of euerie membre, bringing in for my witnesse Goddes ordinance in nature, his plaine will reveled in his worde, and the mindes of such as be moste auncient amongst godlie writers.

And first, where that I affirme the empire of a woman to be a thing repugnant to nature, I meane not onlie that God by the order of his creation hath spoiled woman of authoritie and dominion, but also that man hath seen, proued and pronounced iust causes why that it so shuld be. Man, I say, in many other cases blind, doth in this behalfe see verie clearlie. For the causes be so manifest, that they can not be hid. For who can denie but it repugneth to nature, that the blind shal be appointed to leade and conduct such as do see? That the weake, the sicke, and impotent persones shall norishe and kepe the hole and strong, and finallie, that the foolishhe, madde and phrenetike shal gouerne the discrete, and giue counsel to such as be sober of mind? And such be al women, compared vnto man in bearing of authoritie. For their sight in ciuile regiment, is but blindnes: their strength, weaknes: their counsel, foolishhenes: and iudgement, phrenesie, if it be rightlie considered.

I except such as God by singular priuiledge, and for certein causes knowen onlie to him selfe, hath exempted from the common ranke of women, and do speake of women as nature and experience do this day declare them. Nature I say, doth paynt them furthe to be weake, fraile, impacient, feble and foolishhe: and experience hath declared them to be vnconstant, variable, cruell and lacking the spirit

of counsel and regiment. And these notable faultes haue men in all ages espied in that kinde, for the whiche not onlie they haue removed women from rule and authoritie, but also some haue thoght that men subiect to the counsel or empire of their wyues were vn worthie of all publike office.

Discussion questions:

- How do you think Knox's perspective would have been received at the time?
- How does Knox's reference to God throughout his writing affect the impact it would have had on a 16th century reader?
- How do these extracts link to the presentation of a female character in the text you have studied?

Model paragraph

How does Knox's *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women* present his attitudes to female authority?

Task: Read the model analytical paragraph. Annotate it against the success criteria. What are its strengths? What could be improved?

*John Knox's polemical *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women* gives a vitriolic diatribe against female authority: 'woman in her greatest perfection was made to serve and obey man, not to rule and command him'. The words 'serve' and 'obey' here make clear the societal expectation that women be submissive to their male counterparts, whilst the biblical resonances of these words highlight the deeply entrenched Christian values which guided Elizabethan attitudes towards gender roles. This is further emphasised through the assertion that woman was 'made', implying that women have been designed to fulfil a certain role and that to subvert this norm is to blaspheme. Throughout the extract, Knox repeatedly uses the word 'repugnant' reinforcing the idea that any challenge to male authority is unnatural and repulsive, exemplified in this quotation by the juxtaposition of the words 'serve/obey' and 'rule/command'. Therefore, Knox asserts that in Elizabethan England, there is no place for female autonomy or authority, and that the presence of a woman on its throne is 'repugnant' to nature and to God's will.*

Success Criteria

- Produce a clear, sustained argument
- Use embedded quotations
- Analyse quotations in depth, exploring their implications and the connotations of key words
- Use ambitious vocabulary and punctuation

Task: how does Knox's *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women* present his attitudes to female authority? Link your ideas to the text you are studying.

Planning space

My paragraph

Homework task

Write a letter as a female character from the play you are studying, drawing upon your understanding of what life was like for women in the Shakespearean era.