

Women in Shakespeare's plays
Student Worksheets**Warmer – The role of women in Shakespeare's day**

Read the imaginary text from a newspaper in Shakespeare's times, and discuss with your partner.

Vacancy

Wife for 16th-century man

Should be under 23 years old. Must be able to speak two languages, sew, sing and play two musical instruments. Must like pretty dresses. Must be a good listener and happy to follow orders without question.

Must have a large sum of money to put in husband's bank account.

Fathers, please apply in writing and with a recent portrait to:

- a. From the advert, what was important to a man looking for a wife in Shakespeare's times?
- b. Do you think men these days look for the same things?
- c. Why do you think the advert is addressed to the woman's father?

Task 1 – Describing Shakespeare's women

a. Match the adjectives on the left with the meanings on the right.

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|---------------|--|
| 1. rebellious | a. funny but quite rude and uneducated |
| 2. obedient | b. attractive and persuasive |
| 3. charming | c. going against the rules |
| 4. bawdy | d. following someone else's rules |
| 5. deceitful | e. not taking an active role |
| 6. dependent | f. innocent and pure |
| 7. virtuous | g. lying or cheating |
| 8. scheming | h. making dangerous plans |
| 9. passive | i. needing the support of another |

Task 1 – Describing Shakespeare’s women (continued)

b. Read these short descriptions of some of Shakespeare’s most famous female characters and select the correct adjective.

1. In *Othello*, Desdemona is killed because her husband believes she is cheating, but he is wrong because in fact she is virtuous / deceitful.
2. The nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* is a charming / bawdy woman who likes to make jokes and talk about parts of the body.
3. In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth wants to kill the king so she can have more power. She is passive / scheming.
4. Juliet, in the tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*, does not listen to her father and runs away to marry Romeo. She is one of Shakespeare’s obedient / rebellious female characters.

Task 2 – A job interview with Shakespeare

Work in groups, A and B. The students in group A will be Shakespeare. The students in group B will be actors, looking for a part in one of Shakespeare’s plays.

**Group A: Instructions to Shakespeare**

Using the questions your teacher gives you, interview the actors and suggest a role they could perform in one of your plays.

Group B: Instructions to actors

Think about what kind of female role you would like in one of Shakespeare’s plays. Tell Shakespeare about this when he interviews you.

Task 3 – Reading for gist

Read the text 'What choice for women in Shakespeare's day?' and find which sections mention your characters from Task 2.

What choice for women in Shakespeare's day?**Ideal women**

In Shakespeare's times, women had little choice in many of the important decisions in life. People believed girls should follow the rules set by their fathers, and after marriage a woman became financially dependent on her husband by law. The image of the 'perfect wife' was someone who was charming and obedient.

In contrast, Shakespeare's plays often portray women who are strong, rebellious and independent-minded, and some are even responsible for murder! There are innocent women, like Cordelia in *King Lear* and Desdemona in *Othello*, who try to follow society's ideal; however these often end the play virtuous but dead.

Educating future wives

Formal schooling for girls in Shakespeare's day ended when they were young. Lessons for most of Shakespeare's female audience were limited to what was needed to become a wife, mother and manager of the household or farm. Uneducated women like the bawdy Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* were popular figures in plays, but were not considered suitable choices as a wife!

Inside the wealthier houses, where many of Shakespeare's plays were set, parents employed personal tutors to teach their daughters to be charming young women. Girls studied arts such as languages, sewing, music and dancing. This education was planned to help them attract possible suitors and make suitable marriages. Even when they are lost on an island at sea, Miranda's father in *The Tempest* works hard as her schoolmaster to make sure she will be able to get married.

Deceivers and witches

However, many of Shakespeare's female characters used their skills to charm and deceive husbands and fathers for their own reasons, often ending in tragedy. In *King Lear*, scheming daughters Goneril and Regan tell King Lear how much they love him so they can take his power, then they reject him, driving him mad. And when, in *Othello*, the innocent Desdemona tries to use her charm to help a friend, she is wrongly accused of deceit and her death follows.

Deceit and charms were also linked to magic and witches, a commonly occurring theme in Shakespeare's day. Most of those accused of being witches were unmarried women. The scheming Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* goes to visit witches for help with her plans, and, although she is not single, Lady Macbeth was clearly very different to society's ideal obedient, passive wife.

Shakespeare led the way

Overall, women had a hard time in Shakespeare's day. A girl was expected to live by the rules of her father and then her husband. If she tried to do something different in her life she could be judged very harshly by society.

Shakespeare's female characters, however, often broke the rules. An audience would have been very shocked by the character of Viola, an independent-minded female who pretends to be a man in *Twelfth Night*. And it is not surprising that the first woman to work as a professional actor in England was in a Shakespeare play!

Task 4 – Reading for detail

Read the text again and choose the correct answers below.

1. Women in Shakespeare's times
 - a. were not expected to follow the rules.
 - b. had less power than men.
 - c. could earn their own money.

2. Shakespeare's female characters often
 - a. behaved differently to society's ideals.
 - b. were not financially dependent on their husbands.
 - c. matched the image of the 'perfect wife'.

3. Parents who had money
 - a. did not educate their daughters.
 - b. sent their daughters to university.
 - c. often educated their daughters at home.

4. What was one of the main purposes of educating girls in the arts?
 - a. So they could find a good husband.
 - b. So they could learn to make suits.
 - c. So they could dance in Shakespeare's plays.

5. Goneril and Regan
 - a. told their father they loved education.
 - b. were obedient and loved their father.
 - c. charmed their father to get his power.

6. What led to Desdemona's tragic end?
 - a. She deceived her husband.
 - b. She was wrongly accused of cheating.
 - c. Her husband was guilty of cheating.

7. What do we learn about witches in Shakespeare's times?
 - a. Single women were sometimes believed to be witches.
 - b. Lady Macbeth was based on the character of a witch.
 - c. Witches were very popular characters in plays.

8. How did Shakespeare's plays lead the way for women?
 - a. They were acted mainly by women.
 - b. They portrayed women in professional jobs.
 - c. They showed women in exciting roles which did not follow the rules.



Task 5 – Two Shakespearean heroines

Look at the scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* (left) and *Twelfth Night* (right). Do you think the plays are comedies or tragedies?



Juliet lies with Romeo while their families look on.



Olivia (left) thinks that Viola (right) is a man.

Complete the two text activities from your teacher in pairs to learn more about Juliet and Viola.

Then compare your answers with another pair.

Decide in your groups if you think these words link to the end of Juliet's story (J), Viola's story (V) or both (B).

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|--------------|------------------|----------|
| twin brother | families united | marriage |
| poison | secrets revealed | |

Task 6 – Reacting to Juliet and Viola

How might different people react to the behaviour of Juliet and Viola?

I think young women would have liked Juliet's character because she was rebellious and followed

I think young men would not have wanted to marry Viola because she was too independent.

	Juliet	Viola
Young women		
Fathers		
Young men		
Older women		