The Age of Shakespeare

WOMEN

in the

AGE OF SHAKESPEARE

THERESA D. KEMP

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For Sherpa One and Sherpa Zero
(who really does carry more than "nothing")

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS

PREFACE

Weird Sisters
(weird < Old English *wyrd*, fate)
That Macbeth fellow and his biographers got it
all wrong. They saw old women with a taste
for exotic stews and an uncanny eye for character
and turned them into messengers from hell.
Still, we remember which one killed the king.
How easy it is, though, to forget
that we are also Cleopatra wielding
the power of the queen's X, Portia
dispensing justice in a cloudburst. Even
Ophelia, in a different life, might have grown
grey and wrinkled. Fierce with experience,
she might have dreamt of flowers.

Nadine S. St. Louis, *Weird Sisters*

Since their first appearances under the auspices of boy performers, Shakespeare's "women" (and his plays) have been adapted by every succeeding era. Praised as "well-developed"—even "realistic"—his female characters have both shaped and been reshaped in relation to changing ideas about women. Succeeding generations of readers and viewers of the plays have posed the question of how—and even whether—Shakespeare's women do in fact speak to the experiences and cultural expectations set for women, both in Shakespeare's own time and in later ages and places.

This book introduces students and general readers to some of the issues related to the study of women in the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras in general and Shakespeare's works in particular. Central questions will include the following: What sorts of women are represented in the plays (and what kinds of women seem missing)? What rules seem to govern the actions of female characters? In what ways does early modern patriarchy constrict or restrict them? In what ways do they resist patriarchy? In what ways do Shakespeare's female characters seem to collude with patriarchal power? What—and whom—do we mean by "Shakespeare's

women"? In pursuit of these questions, we will look at some of the sources for ideas about women in Shakespeare's time and in his plays. We will also trace the responses of critics, readers, performers, and viewers of Shakespeare's women throughout the ages.

The first chapters provide background information and historical contexts for considering Shakespeare's women. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the role of women in society from the period of classical antiquity through the medieval period. This chapter also surveys some of the influential ideas about women derived from ancient and medieval sources, and it examines Shakespeare's specific use of stories, characters, and genres drawn from classical antiquity and medieval sources insofar as they involve women. Chapter 2 focuses on the history of women in Shakespeare's world, surveying their status in theory and practice and gesturing toward the extreme range of standards of living experienced by women during this period. This chapter also considers writings by women contemporary with Shakespeare, especially their representation of women and their engagement with key ideas and debates about women.

Chapters 3 through 5 turn more specifically to images of women in Shakespeare's texts, as well as the subsequent theatrical, critical, scholarly, and artistic responses to these images. Chapter 3 examines the representation of women in Shakespeare's plays and poems. Chapter 4 considers how different productions and adaptations have treated women in Shakespeare's plays from the early modern period to the present. Chapter 5 surveys the range of scholarship and criticism on Shakespeare and women from the earliest critical responses to the present time.

The final section of the book provides a selection of primary documents to be read in context with Shakespearean women, as well as a selected, general bibliography of materials useful to the study of women in the age of Shakespeare and in the works themselves. Readers will also find a brief glossary of terms used in this book.

Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of Shakespeare's works are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al. New York: Norton, 1997.

WORK CITED

St. Louis, Nadine S. "Weird Sisters." *Weird Sisters*. Sturtevant, WI: Wolfsong Publications, 2000, 5.

About the Author

Theresa D. Kemp is Professor of English and women's studies at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire. Her articles on early modern British women's writings have appeared in *Literature Compass, Clio,* and *Renaissance Quarterly.* Since 1989 she has been a member of the Editorial Collective for *Feminist Teacher* (University of Illinois Press).

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WOMEN IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

In the context of our consideration of women in the age of Shakespeare, classical antiquity and the Middle Ages served early modern English thinkers and writers in several basic ways. Ancient and medieval folk traditions—such as charivari and skymmingtons; festivals of misrule and other holiday festivities; and mummers' plays and other public social theatricals—continued through to Shakespeare's time. We see them, for example, in the Herne the Hunter episode of *Merry Wives* and the May rites in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Early modern people held a number of general ideas about women inherited from these earlier traditions, including both ideas that had been filtered from antiquity through the Middle Ages and those relearned during the Renaissance.

Classical types and archetypes of women also find their way into Shakespeare's plays: courtesans, such as Nell in *A Comedy of Errors*; perhaps Bianca in *Othello* (she is certainly a sexual woman not under the official control of a man); Mistress Quickly in *II Henry IV*; and a variety of abbesses in charge of convents and widows living without the protection or control of a man (as in *A Comedy of Errors*, *Measure for Measure*, and *All's Well*). Indeed, Latin language and its literatures stood at the heart of the early modern English schoolboy's studies, and writers of the period, including Shakespeare, were often strongly influenced by classical traditions of government, education, philosophy, and art. The bulk of what we find about women, however, is not positive.

Ancient mythologies (Greek, Roman, Jewish, and early Christian) all identified women as the source of all the world's troubles. From Hesiod, we get the Greek's version of the first woman, Pandora, who was sent by Zeus to punish man for Prometheus's theft of fire. Endowed with insatiable curiosity and given a box (or jar) as a wedding gift—but told she must not to open it—Pandora was unable to resist. Opening the box, Pandora unleashed upon the world death, plagues, old age, sickness, and all the miseries of human life. Similarly, the Old Testament located the cause of death and the world's sorrows in the first woman, Eve. Likewise linked to insatiability (of appetite, of curiosity), Eve's inability to obey is presented as the introduction of death to humanity. Both Greek and Semitic mythologies present the creation of women as an evil necessary to reproduction,

men being incapable of it on their own. The ancients also handed down tales of wicked wives like Phyllis, who allegedly rode her husband Aristotle like a beast, and Xanthippe, who reputedly dumped a full chamber pot on her husband Socrates's head. Such stories continued to be popularly repeated and even depicted in visual form throughout Shakespeare's time.

Especially significant are the Renaissance appropriations of the ideal woman, which in the Greco-Roman tradition was the obedient, chaste, and modest wife. Such a wife's experiences were limited to the domestic and private. Shakespeare's Lucrece has thus been properly isolated from the world beyond her domestic walls. Never having "coped with stranger eyes," Lucrece found Tarquin's lustful glances incomprehensible (*The Rape of Lucrece* 99). In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Enobarbus describes Octavia as being of a "holy, cold and still conversation," to which Menas replies, "Who would not have his wife so?" (*Antony and Cleopatra* 2.6.122–124). Female chastity, however, entails not simple sexual control but a stoic constancy and patience of mind. The Roman historian Plutarch, for example, writing of Brutus's wife, Portia, in his *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, claims she "always showed a constant and patient state of mind," even when separated from her husband (124). The question of how women are able to maintain their chastity—defined as unwavering mental constancy—in the face of great external turbulence is central to the few Roman female characters who figure in Shakespeare's plays—for example, Octavia in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Portia in *Julius Caesar*, and Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*.

In his dramatic and poetic depictions of women, Shakespeare resembled his literary contemporaries by explicitly and implicitly drawing upon antiquity's conventional ideas about women. Such ideas are woven, sometimes seamlessly, into the fabric of his plays, as when Hamlet exclaims "Woman, thy name is frailty" (*Hamlet* 1.2.146); or in *The Winter's Tale* where Leontes imagines himself a cuckold simply because he believes that many other men are; or in *Othello*, where Iago, Brabanzio, and finally Othello give voice to dark suspicion and ugly innuendos, exposing the misogynist underbelly of the world in which these plays were written. At other times, these anciently derived, misogynist ideas of women are given a more full exposition, as in the case of Posthumous, whose mistaken belief that his wife has betrayed him sexually incites his diatribe in which he lays the root of all evil at the foot of woman. Lamenting the fact that procreation cannot take place without women and claiming "there's no motion / That tends to vice in man but I affirm / It is the woman's part," Posthumous concludes that he will plague them by writing the "truth" about them (2.5.1–35). While still misogynist at heart, such ideas are also given humorous vent in several plays, perhaps most notably when Touchstone claims that the cuckold's horns brought about by marriage are unfortunately necessary (*As You Like It* 3.3.45–49).

Moreover, Shakespeare reworked specific classical and medieval stories, some of which involved women (either incidentally or as key figures). Writers from the classical and medieval past provided early modern writers like Shakespeare with source materials for narratives, character types, and literary genres. Lovesickness as a literary trope is found in many of Shakespeare's sonnets and plays. Ovid's *Ars*

Amandi and *Metamorphoses* both associate love with melancholia and an imbalance of temperaments. Ibn Hazm's eleventh-century Arabic treatise *The Dove's Neck Ring* and Andreas Capellanus's twelfth-century Latin treatise *De Amore* both similarly present a pathological image of love as a malady, as do the twelfth-century poems and romances of Chrétien de Troyes. In the fourteenth century, Boccaccio and Chaucer continue to present love as a physiological imbalance. Although the medieval period witnessed a developing shift from a magical explanation for love to a more medical one, plays like Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* suggest that traces of the former view lingered for centuries (and, indeed, can still be found popularly to this day). English writers of Shakespeare's time were heavily influenced by medieval continental sonnets, including Petrarch's fourteenth-century poems and sonnets about Laura. Medieval reception of Ovid, as seen in Chrétien de Troyes, Marie de France, and Chaucer, also provided early modern writers like Shakespeare with access to classical and medieval writings simultaneously.

Literary genres of note include the dawn song, or alba, drawn from continental traditions of courtly love (in which clandestine lovers must part with the coming of the day), which we see in the famous scene in *Romeo and Juliet* in which the lovers resist acknowledging that daybreak has come. Shakespeare's age retained and transformed a number of medieval conventions of courtly love. The lady of courtly lyrics (e.g., Dante's Beatrice and Petrarch's Laura) and the elevation of her as Platonic ideal and figure of beauty or the divine appears in both straightforward and mocked presentations. The modes and genre of courtly love, however, rarely imagine an inner life or subjectivity for the lady; she is merely the object of the speaker's desire. As we shall see, early modern writers did not expand the imaginative subjectivity of female characters much more than their predecessors had. Perhaps most interesting, however, is the way in which the ideology of courtly love—which viewed true love as necessarily adulterous (marriages being made by arrangement)—is transformed as emerging notions of romantic love within companionate marriage come into conflict with conventional standards that continue to retain patriarchal control over marriages. The negotiation of the tension between older views of marriage as a social enterprise and emerging ideas of marriage as a private relationship between husband and wife make up the central drama for a number of Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies.

Classical and medieval scientific and pseudoscientific ideas about birthing and gynecology also continued to resonate in the early modern period. Medieval texts like the thirteenth-century *The Secrets of Women*, for example, continued to be reissued during Shakespeare's time. In *Macbeth*, Macduff claims to have been "not of woman" born, indicating his arrival by caesarean section, and by the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, church officials had begun recommending the procedure as a means of saving the unborn child's life when the mother had died during childbirth. That caesarian section continued to be linked to maternal death, however, kept the procedure shrouded in mystery and the potential for the supernatural. Medieval ideas about prenatal events also

carried over into the early modern period, in spite of a supposedly increasingly scientific approach to physiology. The Duchess of Gloucester in Shakespeare's *Richard III* links the wicked nature of her son to his deformed birth. The impact of visual representations on pregnant women, including the belief that they have a physiological impact, for example, can be seen in stories from Shakespeare's time of pregnant women giving birth to deformed babies after seeing chimeras (terrifying images of monstrous creatures).

Shakespeare is remarkable for his brilliance in revising, transforming, and revitalizing earlier works, and some of these reimagined tales included important female figures. On occasion he worked specifically from certain writers and texts, drawing most heavily from the following three: Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (available in Arthur Golding's 1567 English translation), Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (available in Thomas North's 1579 translation from the French), and Raphael Holinshed's 1587 revised second edition of *The Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*. Ten of Shakespeare's English history plays, as well as *King Lear, Cymbeline*, and *Macbeth*—roughly one third of his oeuvre— derive from Holinshed's work.

Greco-Roman stories provided Shakespeare not only with a good deal of his material, including basic plots, but also lengthy passages translated and sometimes even lifted whole. The story of *Pyramus and Thisbe* (produced in the rude mechanical's play-within-the-play), for example, is drawn from Ovid. He also drew upon a number of classical habits of metaphor, figures of speech, and themes, which he adapted to early modern tastes. Additionally, he incorporated the theme of transformation as developed in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; this theme appears most notably in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (especially Bottom's transformation into an ass, and Titania's love for him; but also the magical transformations of the lovers as well). The theme of transformation can also be seen in cross-dressing plots, the radical reversals of fortunes, and mistaken identities running through such plays as *A Winter's Tale* (with its reworking of the Pygmalion myth in Hermione's statuesque restoration), *Twelfth Night, Cymbeline*, and others. Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* clearly draws on both classical and medieval sources, including the recent translations of Homer's *Iliad* by Chapman (1598); Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (which appeared in a new edition in 1598); and Caxton's *Recueil of the Histories* (which also appeared in a new edition in 1596).

In addition to specific plotlines, these earlier works also provided Shakespeare with conventions such as archetypes and stock characters, as well as conventions of genre (such as Senecan revenge tragedy and blasons), such themes and motifs as transformation (drawing especially from Ovid), and questions of liberty and sovereignty. While much early criticism examining Shakespeare in relation to ancient and medieval history focused on the question of the accuracy of Shakespeare's depictions of the ancient world (for example, pointing out such infamous anachronisms as the reference to clocks in *Julius Caesar* and billiards in *Antony and Cleopatra*), little attention was given to the accuracy of his gendered representations or his depiction of women from historical periods. Shakespeare, however, was a playwright and poet, not a historian. Insofar as this chapter looks

at Shakespeare's use of history, I will focus primarily on his thematic and dramatic uses of history, rather than on his historical accuracy.

GREEK WOMEN

The histories of classical Rome and Greece, as Shakespeare would have inherited them, were predominantly male-centered. Moreover, even now, after several decades of feminist scholarship have lent progress to the recovery of the history of women, most of what we do know concerns an elite minority. Traditional studies of the classical period have focused on wives, relegating them to the domestic or household realm. Such studies view women as solely ruled by, rather than ever ruling over, other women and men of lower classes. The lives of most women have gone unrecorded, and it is likely that the brevity and brutality of the majority of women's lives would stand in stark contrast to even the most restrictive details of the elite minority. Shakespeare would have had access to knowledge about only a select few women from the ancient world.

Most writings about women from this period are written from male perspectives, and very little survives that is known with certainty to have been actually composed by women. The sixth-century BCE poet Sappho of Lesbos, for example, is said by ancient sources to have produced nine volumes, but only a handful of poems and other fragments of her work have survived the neglect—and sometimes blatant hostility—typically faced by women's work. Nonetheless, Sappho was praised in her own time as among the best, if not the best, lyric poet of the day; and her work was translated into Latin by Catullus and later cited positively by such revered authors as Horace, Ovid, and Martial. In addition to Sappho's works, a few scraps of poetry and letters purportedly written by women also exist (though in many cases the gendered authorship of these anonymous pieces is contested or otherwise not definitively ascertainable). The names of some of these third- and fourth-century authors include Erinna, Anyte, Nossis, and Moero—but again Shakespeare is not likely to have known them (e.g., fifty of the fifty-four extant lines of Erinna's poem "The Distaff" were not discovered until 1928).

Laws provide some insight into the lives of ancient women, but again these are generated from a male-dominant position, focusing on areas of most concern to men. When the laws do address women specifically, they usually concern elite women. Additionally, laws must be carefully used in terms of what they reveal about actual practices. Sometimes rules and laws are not always enforced with regularity (even in our own time, for example, we have laws on the books that are not upheld). With regard to prohibitive laws in particular, these often indicate the presence rather than the absence of the behaviors the authorities were attempting to eliminate (otherwise, there would be no need for a law against it).

While some differences among the various groups seem to have occurred, the dominant view of women in classical antiquity was one of inferiority, posited within a worldview based in binary oppositions (e.g., male/female; active/passive; strong/weak, and so on). At best, women were seen as deformed and defective