

Tikrit University

College of Education for Humanities

English Department



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Drama

(Elizabethan Women)

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Elizabethan Women

In addition to his marriage, Shakespeare's main reason in giving his female characters powerful roles is the historical factor, that is to say, the need of his age. As far as historical factor is concerned, England was ruled by a strong female figure, namely Queen Elizabeth. The era of Elizabeth I was very important, during which Shakespeare was writing his plays. Definitely, any writer should indicate the traditions of the age in which he lives. The age has its influence on the writings of authors. At the very beginning of Shakespeare's career as a writer, the roles that female characters play are very simple and almost has no great effect on the stream of actions. But gradually this role developed and elaborated and its importance increased. With a deep look at the life of Elizabethan women and their roles in society, readers will notice that the authors try to depict and deliver this society to the audience through their writings.

One may not suspect that women, whom the dramatists depict in their plays and appear on the stage, are not the creation of the playwrights' imagination; this image of women on stage is almost true to the reality of women of that age. Shakespeare in his plays draws the image of women in his time, their position in life, their relations to men, ...etc. Women of the Elizabethan age share the strength with their great queen.

Elizabethan England was a fiercely patriarchal* society with laws that heavily restricted what women could and could not do. The roles of men and women in the Elizabethan age were different. Women had to stay at home and to look after the family affairs while men had to work and gain money for living. Definitely, the roles of both were important. But there were some restrictions on what women could do. Some of these limitations were the following: **1)** only boys can go to schools and girls could be taught by a tutor at home; **2)** girls were prevented from going to

university; **3)** women were not allowed to participate in elections; **4)** professions like law, medicine, politics, navy and army were reserved for men. Women could write works of literature though few were published; **5)** women could not act on stage in England till the seventeenth century. In acting Shakespeare's plays, young boys played the roles of female characters; **6)** sons and brothers only could be heirs to their brother's or father's titles. The only exception was the crown. This did not mean that the daughters were unloved and unwanted, on the contrary, they saw girls as gifts from God; **7)** women belonged to their fathers (or their brothers if their father died), and then to their husbands. Women could not own property of their own. This is one of the reasons Queen Elizabeth never married – she did not want to give up her power to a man. The only exceptions were widows – women whose husbands had died. A widow was in charge of her own life and property, but would be likely to marry again to find someone to protect her and to be the legal guardian to her children; **8)** some men believed that women should be submissive, while man, who was the head of the marriage, had the right to punish his wife but "not to be cruel or inflict bodily harm." Elizabethan woman raised to believe that they were inferior to men and that men knew better! Disobedience was seen as a crime against their religion. Rape without marriage was considered an abominable crime, and a man was to be hanged if he was found guilty.

A man was considered to be the head of a marriage, and he had the legal right to chastise his wife. However, it is important to understand what this "headship" meant. It did not mean, as if often supposed, that the husband was able to command his wife to do anything he pleased, in other words, be a petty tyrant. He was expected to take care of her, make sure she had everything she needed, and most importantly to love her and be a good father to any children they had. If a husband felt the need to chastise his wife, then he was not allowed to be cruel or inflict bodily harm. If he did abuse his wife, then he could be prosecuted or prevented from living with her.

There was no divorce (as we know it) in Elizabethan times. Marriage generally lasted as long as the couple both lived. If a couple did want to separate, then they needed to obtain an annulment, which, if granted, meant that their marriage had never been lawful.

The most attractive thing is that women in the Elizabethan era had more freedom than those in the other centuries. Although the Renaissance helped men and women to gain what they wanted in the field of knowledge, yet women were prevented from going to university. But there was the fact that noble women were educated to high levels in order not to be dim in the presence of their highly educated queen.

Though this period was considered a glorious period, yet there were women who suffered from being unmarried. Some women, like queen Elizabeth, did not want to marry. Readers might ask why Queen Elizabeth never married; some of those who had read her life story theorize that the reason was the bad treatment of her father to his wives. Others believe that she could not marry the only man that she really loved, Robert Dudley*, because he was already married. Queen Elizabeth is still remembered nowadays because of what she has done during her life.

* Patriarchal: describes a general structure in which men have power over women.

***Robert Dudley** (1532 – 1588) was the first Earl of Leicester, the son of John Dudley, Earl of Warwick, Duke of Northumberland, and Protector of England during the reign of Edward VI. and the long-standing favourite Queen Elizabeth I of England . She was his childhood friend.