Shakespeare’s Rebel Women

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ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare’s women are in rebellion against societal norms. Shakespeare creates female characters surpassing the confines of their cultures while seeking to assert their rights. Adriana from Comedy of Errors and Kate from The Taming of the Shrew are more than stereotypical shrews; Shakespeare portrays both as intelligent women, skillful with the use of words. Hermia from a Midsummer Night’s Dream and Juliet from Romeo and Juliet are young women in love who choose their own mates. Beatrice from Much Ado About Nothing resists social conventions and yearns for a match made from mutual trust. Cordelia from King Lear is a person who follows her conscience at all costs. The complex characters demonstrate women trying to reshape society to find their rightful place in it.

Introduction

Throughout the plays of William Shakespeare, women are in rebellion against the boundaries of societal norms. During Renaissance times, females were considered inferior to men and were treated like property; as they grew into womanhood their ownership shifted from their fathers to their husbands. But Shakespeare is ahead of his time and does not treat women in the standard societal way; he pens heroines with depth of character, a wide array of emotions, and keen intellects. By portraying women as people, not merely empty-headed dolls, Shakespeare gives his audience insight about his forward thinking. Charles Goddard, Shakespearean scholar, supports this view by stating that male superiority is a “[. . .] wholly unShakespearean doctrine [. . .] a view which there is not the slightest evidence Shakespeare ever held” (1: 68). Shakespeare creates female characters who surpass the confines of their culture as they press against society; even when they push for different reasons, they are always seeking to assert their rights as people. As I examine Shakespeare’s rebel women in written chronological order, two intertwined progressions will come into focus: as the Bard’s writing craft ripens and matures, so do the women he includes in his plays. Adriana from Comedy of Errors and Kate from The Taming of the Shrew, characters from early comedies, are both
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considered shrews, the stereotype of a bad woman. Shakespeare goes beyond the stereotype and portrays both as intelligent women skillful with the use of words. In slightly later works, Hermia from *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* and Juliet from *Romeo and Juliet*, both younger women, want what typical young women want: love. Each fights against her father and societal norms to choose the husband of her heart. Beatrice, a more mature heroine from the later comedy *Much Ado about Nothing*, resists social conventions of marriage for the sake of marriage; Beatrice yearns for a match formed from mutual trust. Finally Cordelia, in *King Lear*, one of Shakespeare’s late works, is portrayed not so much as a woman, but as a person on a quest to follow her own conscience at all costs. The similarities and differences of these complex characters demonstrate women trying to reshape the bounds of society to find their rightful place in it.

**Shakespeare’s Shrews**

Adriana from *Comedy of Errors* and Kate from *The Taming of a Shrew*

Adriana and Kate both start out as stereotypical shrews. Shrews are single or married women known for sharp tongues which lash out with ferocious cruelty. However, verbal assault is not their only weapon; shrews can also unleash their violent tempers through physical brutality. Adriana is impatiently waiting for her husband to return home for dinner as she rails bitterly against her husband to her sister, Luciana. While Adriana’s words imply that she is a shrew, Kate is introduced as a shrew with bold dialogue and actions. Kate’s true shrewishness shines through as she verbally and physically assaults her sister Bianca, rages at her father, and unleashes her fury on Petruchio, her future husband, with fiery speech and unwomanly actions as she strikes him. Charles Brooks of Long Beach College, California, explains the subtle difference between a witty mistress and a shrewish wife. “[…] one of the traits that was particularly desirable in a Renaissance mistress was witty discourse, because mistresses had to set an eloquent tone for court. But the difference between wit and shrewishness is a difference of degree, not kind; both result from the same power of speech, so that it is but a step from the witty mistress to the shrewish wife” (Brooks 353).

Adriana appears on the pages of *Comedy of Errors*, written between 1589 –1593, and believed to be Shakespeare’s first play. David Bevington, renowned Shakespeare scholar, says that *Comedy of Errors* is “A superb illustration of Shakespeare’s apprenticeship” (2). Bevington further explains that at times the play seems adolescent: it is full of verbal jests, “breaking wind, [and] bawdy jokes about cuckold’s horns”
When Adriana, wife of Antipholus of Ephesus, is first introduced, it would be easy to use her character in stereotypical fashion as the shrew who uses her sharp tongue to drive her husband to the courtesan. Even in this early stage of his writing, Shakespeare distinguishes himself by making Adriana a character for whom the audience feels empathy. She is human. From the following speech it is clear that Adriana fears that she is losing her allure to her husband:

His company do his minions grace,
Whilst I at home starve for a merry look,
Hath homely age th’ alluring beauty took
From thy poor cheek? Then he hath wasted it.
Are my discourses dull? Barren my wit? (II.2.86-90)

Her distress is further illustrated when she says: “Since my beauty cannot please his eye, / I’ll weep what’s left away, and weeping die” (II.1.112-113).

During Renaissance times, society dictated that married women embrace the double standard of husbands’ having affairs while wives did not. Adriana rejects society’s notions and raves for thirty-six lines, revealing a rancorous attitude towards the man she believes to be her cheating husband. She flouts convention and asks him how he would feel if she were unfaithful to him.

How dearly it would touch thee to the quick,
Shouldst thou hear I were licentious
And that this body, consecrate to thee,
By ruffian lust should contaminate. (II.2.129-132)

Adriana grows more dramatic and declares that Antipholus of Ephesus would, “tear the skin off her harlot brow” and cut the wedding ring from her “false hand” (II.2.135-136) if she were unfaithful to him. Adriana not only points out the double standard, she accuses her husband of figuratively contaminating her:

I am possessed of an adulterate blot;
My blood is mingled with the crime of lust.
For if we two be one, and thou play false,
I do digest the poison of thy flesh,
Being strumpeted by thy contagion. (II.2.139-143)

In spite of this, Adriana’s demeanor softens at the end of her speech as she implores Antipholus of Ephesus to remain faithful to her because while she is “distained” he remains “undishonored” (II.2.144-145).

Shakespeare further endears Adriana to the audience by showing her conflicting emotions. She is understandably upset when she believes her husband not only was unfaithful in the past, but now desires her sister’s affections. Luciana beseeches Adriana to have patience with Antipholus. Adriana responds:
I cannot, nor I will not, hold me still.
My tongue, though not my heart, shall have his will.
He is deformed, crooked, old and sere,
Ill faced, worse bodied, shapeless everywhere;
Vicious, ungentle, foolish, blunt unkind,
Stigmatic in making, worse in mind. (IV. 2.17-22)

Love for her husband is evident when Adriana states, “My heart prays for him, though my tongue do curse” (IV. 2.27-28).

In the final act Adriana shows she is not a shrew, but a devoted wife. She pleads with the Antipholus’s mother, the Abbess, to allow Adriana to take her ill husband home even though she believes he has wronged her greatly. When the Abbess refuses to release Antipholus, Adrianna pleads her case eloquently to the Duke. Adriana, an intelligent woman of words, rebels against the rules of society that say a woman should be passive and successively persuades the Duke to look into the situation.

Katharina, or Kate the curt, as she is sometimes called, is no subtle shrew. Upon meeting Petruchio Shakespeare lets the audience know Kate is physically beautiful, but it is her obdurate cantankerous will that brings her fame. Kate seems to be the type of woman who would first scratch out a person’s eyes and then spit in them. Shakespeare introduces this rebellious woman to audiences in The Taming of the Shrew between 1592 and 1594. The Taming of the Shrew is full of illusions; for a time the audience is convinced that Kate, who dominates and bullies men, is a shrew and that her sister Bianca is not. According to Harold C. Goddard in the Meaning of Shakespeare, Volume I, “[…] the play is an early version of What Every Woman Knows—what every woman knows being of course, that the woman can lord it over the man so long as she allows him to think that he is lording it over her” (1: 68). Kate the curt breaks out of the mold of a stereotypical shrew; as she learns to play the game, she figures out how to outsmart society, pacify Petruchio, and preserve her own self-respect.

Early in the play Kate comes across as vicious and out of control as she strikes Bianca and vows to get revenge on her for no apparent reason. It is here that Shakespeare gives the audience a glimpse into Kate’s world. Baptista refers to daughter Kate as a “dame” (II.1.22) and calls Bianca his “poor girl” (II.2.24). Baptista goes on to say: “Why dost thou wrong her that ne’r wrong thee? / When did she cross thee with a bitter word?” (II.1.27-28). Even if Kate has the “devilish spirit” of which Baptista accuses Kate, it is unlikely that Bianca has never said a cross word to Kate. It is clear from this passage that Baptista favors Bianca. Kate points out her father’s favoritism.

What, will you not suffer me? Nay, now I see
She is your treasure, she must have a husband;
I must dance barefoot on her wedding day,
And for your love to her lead apes in hell.
Talk not to me, I will go sit and weep
Till I can find occasion for revenge. (II.1.31-36)

Kate seems to fear that her younger sister will have a husband, and she will be an old maid.

To Kate’s and everyone else’s surprise, a suitor enters soon after her encounter with Baptista. Kate’s and Petruchio’s first meeting is a battle of the sexes sparked by verbal sparring. They are equally matched as they quip back and forth, and Kate’s bold actions and lively wit are evidenced. When Petruchio tells Kate he is a gentleman she says, “That I’ ll try” (II.1.220), and slaps him. Petruchio promises to cuff her if she strikes him again. Kate replies with a statement full of double meaning,

So may you lose your arms.
If you strike me, you are no gentleman,
And if no gentleman, why then no arms. (II.1.221-223)

According to the footnote in Bevington’s The Complete Works of Shakespeare, no arms means: “no coat of arms (with pun on arms, as limbs of the body)” (125). This shows Kate not to be rash and out of control but deliberate and clever. Kate and Petruchio continue their cunning wrangling with words.

PETRUCHIO: Nay, come Kate, come. You must not look so sour.
KATHARINA: It is my fashion when I see a crab.
PETRUCHIO: Why, here’s no crab, and therefore look not sour.
KATHARINA: There is, there is.
PETRUCHIO: Then show it me.
KATHARINA: Had I a glass, I would.
PETRUCHIO: Now by Saint George, I am too young for you.
KATHARINA: Yet you are withered.
PETRUCHIO: Tis with cares.
KATHARINA: I care not. (II.1.228-236)

Kate says she cares not, but she weeps when Petruchio does not appear at their wedding. It is possible Kate is crying because she is humiliated by Petruchio’s lateness, but it is also conceivable that she is crying because she misses the man who finds her sweet and beautiful. Goddard points out that when Petruchio first calls Kate “sweet and lovely” it is ironic, but he goes on further to say: “The words just of themselves are manna to her soul, and her intuition tells her that, whether he knows it or not, he really means them” (1: 70).
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Petruchio’s taming of Kate begins when he comes to the wedding drunk and unsuitably dressed. He whisks her off before the reception and takes her to his home, where she is deprived of food and sleep, as Petruchio pretends to be helping her. Petruchio has a well defined plan to make Kate “come and know her keeper’s call” (IV.1.182). He brags after his lengthy explanation:

This is a way to kill a wife with kindness;
And thus I’ll curb her mad and headstrong humor.
He that knows better how to tame a shrew,
Now let him speak. Tis charity to show. (IV.1.196-199)

Through Petruchio’s calculated treatment of her, Kate begins to realize that if she wants to live an enjoyable life, she has to play the game. Kate must lead Petruchio to believe that she believes he is the Lord of the Home.

It is clear that Kate is learning to play the game when she sets out to visit her father with Petruchio. Kate agrees with Petruchio when he calls the sun the moon and the moon the sun. Kate also acquiesces with her husband when Petruchio points out an old man and says the old man is a young woman. Kate greets the elder as if a young maiden. When Petruchio acts surprised by Kate’s greeting and asks her if she is mad, Kate saves face by deftly handling the situation. She says to the old man,

Pardon, old father, my mistaking eyes,
That have been so bedazzled by the sun
That everything I look on seemeth green.
Now I perceive that thou are a reverend father.
Pardon, I pray thee for my mad mistaking. (IV.5.44-48)

Kate illustrates she is witty and intelligent because she knows how to play to each man, pleasing and entertaining both of them.

Shakespeare reveals rebellious and curst Kate in the final scene as a transformed sweet and lovely Kate. Even though she is still domineering, she has shed the exterior of a shrew. Kate harshly reprimands Bianca and the widow for not coming when their husbands called them. She shows her cleverness and playfulness to Petruchio by exaggerating his husbandly care for her, while at the same time, stroking his manly ego:

Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,
Thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee,
And for thy maintenance commits his body
To painful labor both by sea and land,
To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,
Whilst thy liest warm at home, secure and safe;
And craves no other tribute at thy hands
But love, fair looks, and true obedience—
Too little payment for so great a debt. (V.2.150-158)
Kate makes herself appear to be all humility as she entreats the other women to place their hands at their husbands’ feet as a token of duty. Kate gives an eloquent speech demonstrating her intelligence and her command of language. By the end of the play the audience is convinced that Kate is woman full of grace, wisdom, and wit; there is no doubt that she and Petruchio are an equal match. Kate rebelled against her father, her sister, and society to gain what she desires: i.e., respect and love.

Charles Brooks sums up the rebel women, Adriana and Kate, this way: “Neither Adrianna or Kate is simply shrewish out of a desire to be shrewish” (351). Shakespeare shows these women to be more than stereotypical shrews railing at the men in their lives. “This humanizing of the shrew is not an artistic blunder” (Brooks 352). Shakespeare portrays Adriana and Kate triumphing over realistic struggles that prove to be timeless for men and women both: insecurity, aging, favoritism, and the desire to be loved.

**Shakespeare’s Young Lovers**

Hermia from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and Juliet from *Romeo and Juliet*

As Shakespeare moves into his career, he introduces audiences to two young women who cast aside convention by choosing their own husbands and marrying for love. Hermia, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and Juliet, *Romeo and Juliet*, both bravely face the reality that death is a viable consequence for rebelling against their fathers. These plays were written around the same time and seem to share similarities. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* appeared between 1594-1595, and *Romeo and Juliet* was authored between 1594-1596. One similarity is that they are both part tragedy and part comedy. The comedy, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, opens dramatically with a potentially tragic confrontation between Egeus and Hermia; and conversely David Bevington discloses, “Though a tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet* is, in some ways, more closely comparable to Shakespeare’s romantic comedies” (977). A second similarity is that Hermia and Juliet parallel each other as the plays parallel each other. Hermia and Juliet are different from the typical passive young Renaissance ladies; they battle family and destiny by taking fate into their own hands.

Hermia appears to be an ill-fated heroine in the opening scene of a dramatic play when the audience first beholds her. She stands silently while her father, Egeus, brings his case against her and her love, Lysander, before Duke Theseus. David Marshall of Yale University recounts this scene in his article, “Exchanging Visions: Reading *A Midsummer Night’s Dream.*” “The dispute is figured as an economic one: Egeus insists that his daughter
is private property (‘she is mine, and all my right of her / I do estate unto Demetrius’ [97-98]) which Lysander is trying to ‘filch’(36)” (551). Marshall further delineates, “[...] the struggle over Hermia is also pictured as a conflict over control of her imagination and vision. Egeus accuses Lysander: ‘thou hast given her rhymes voice verses of feigning love, / And stol’n the impression of her fantasy . . .’” (28-32). Egeus believes it is his right to influence and to mold Hermia. It is apparent Theseus is in agreement with Egeus when he gives a charge to Hermia while asking her what she has to say.

To you your father should be as a god,
One that composed your beauties; yea, and one
To whom you are but as a form in wax,
By him imprinted, and within his power
To leave the figure, or disfigure it. (I.1.46-51)

In the next line Theseus tells Hermia, “Demetrius is a worthy gentleman” (I.1.52). Hermia, disregarding societal rules, argues with the Duke as she speaks for the first time, “So is Lysander” (I.1.53). When Theseus tells Hermia she should hold her father’s opinion more highly than her own, she boldly declares, “I would my father but looked with my eyes” (I.1.56). Marshall points out, “Her impression [as a ‘form in wax’ (I.1.48)] is seen as rightfully his [Egeus’] which is why Hermia’s claim to think and speak for herself is also a crime against her father” (551).

Hermia knows that she has overstepped her bounds by speaking out, and so she asks the Duke’s pardon: “I do entreat Your Grace to pardon me, / I know not by what power I am made bold” (I.1.58-59). Hermia shows deference with her speech, but she does not stop talking.

But I beseech Your Grace that I may know
The worst that may befall me in this case
If I refuse to wed Demetrius. (I.1.62-64)

These lines show Hermia in a courageous light. Hermia recognizes that she is going against her father, and she wants to understand what she will face if she continues to defy him. Theseus presents her with three options: marry Demetrius, die, or become a nun. Hermia will not yield to her father and marry Demetrius; she says of Egeus, “Unto his lordship, whose unwished yoke / My soul consents not to give sovereignty” (I.1.81-82). It is clear that Hermia would rather give up life and have freedom in her soul than to live bound to someone she does not love.

Lysander and Hermia do not want to live without each other, and so Lysander proposes a plan. Paul A. Olson of John Hopkins University explains, “Lysander, to escape from Athenian restraint, suggests that Hermia go with him to the woods outside the city and attempt a clandestine marriage. Generally such unions were described as illicit in the sixteenth century, and they would hardly be looked on with any favor by parents at
an aristocratic wedding. Hermia is not abashed, however” (104-105). Rebellious Hermia, a single young woman, agrees to meet her intended the following night in the woods, alone; this meeting by itself is incredibly shocking by sixteenth century standards. Proper young women did not traipse about unaccompanied, especially at night. Hermia’s actions become brazen when she agrees to run away and marry Lysander. If they were caught, death would be the likely result.

Hermia may be brazen and determined to get what she wants, but she is still virtuous. Therefore, not only is she bold with Theseus and her father, she is bold with Lysander in the woods the following night. Lysander suggests they sleep together before they are wed, “One turf shall serve as pillow for us both; / One heart, one bed, two bosoms, and one troth” (II.2.47-48). Hermia refuses him, telling Lysander, “Do not lie so near” (II.2.50). When Lysander entreats her further she sweetly declines:

Lysander riddles very prettily.
Now much breshrew my manners and my pride
If Hermia meant to say Lysander lied.
But gentle friend, for love and courtesy
Lie further off, in human modesty.
Such separation as may well be said
Becomes a virtuous bachelor and a maid,
So far be distant; and good night, sweet friend.
Thy love ne’er alter till thy sweet life end! (II.2.59-67)

Hermia gets her way and Lysander’s respect. Lysander replies:
Amen, amen, to that fair prayer, say I,
And then end life when I end loyalty!
Here is my bed. Sleep give thee all his rest. (II.2.68-70)

This is where the drama ends and the comedy begins. The lover’s vows of endless devotion are temporarily interrupted by meddling fairies as Puck charms Lysander and he falls in love with Hermia’s friend, Helena.

When Hermia awakes and finds Demetrius there and Lysander gone, she accuses Demetrius of killing Lysander. In her desperation, she orders Demetrius to slay her also. After sharply rebuking him, she asks Demetrius, if he has not killed Lysander, to help her find him. When Demetrius asks her what she will give him in return for his help, Hermia gives him a feisty reply:

A privilege to see me no more.
And from thy hated presence part I so.
See me no more, whether he be dead or no. (III.2.79-81)

Hermia, finding no help from Demetrius, sets out to find Lysander on her own. When Hermia finds Lysander, she is dismayed to discover that he is in love with Helena. Believing strongly in Lysander’s devotion, Hermia thinks he must be scorning Helena. After being rebuffed several times by
her former lover, Hermia aims her wrath on her friend turned enemy, Helena.

O me! You juggler! You cankerblossom!
You thief of love! What, have you come by night
And stol’n my love’s heart from him? (III.2.282-284)

The women continue their warfare of words until a belligerent Hermia, goaded about her small stature, physically threatens Helena: “How low am I? I am not so low / But that my nails can reach into thine eyes” (III.2.297-298). Hermia may be small in form, but it is clear by Helena’s speech that she fears her: “I pray you, though you mock me gentlemen, / Let her not hurt me [. . . ]” (III.2.299-300).

Hermia shows herself to be a strong character even when she is downtrodden and believes that she has lost Lysander’s love. As she lies down wearily to sleep, she prays that the “heavens shield Lysander” (III.2.47). She does not give up on her true love. Following scene three, Hermia fades into the background with only a few lines left. Shakespeare reveals Hermia’s silent triumph in scene five, as she appears on her wedding day married to Lysander. Hermia is not the typical young Renaissance lady; she is a recalcitrant rebel whose rebellion rewards her with the husband of her choice.

Shakespeare molds his youngest female rebel in *Romeo and Juliet*. Juliet, not yet fourteen, shines with luminous beauty, wisdom, and strength surpassing her years; she fights for love in the present while waging war against hatred stemming from the past. Juliet, who is so tightly constrained by her father that she is not even allowed to go confession without his permission, secretly marries Romeo who is a Montague and therefore an enemy of the Capulets. The impetus that constantly propels Juliet forward is love and sacred passion.

The star-crossed lovers meet at a party that Capulet is throwing. Juliet, by request of her mother, is to “Read o’er the volume of young Paris’ face” (I.3.82) to see if she would like to marry him. Paris is the man Juliet’s father, Capulet, wants Juliet to marry. But Paris becomes a pale ghost fading into the background upon Juliet’s meeting of Romeo. When the couple first speaks to one another, their lines form a sonnet; it is clear that Shakespeare is emphasizing through poetic form that this is true love at first sight.

When Juliet realizes Romeo is a Montague, she says, “My only love sprung from my only hate! / To early seen unknown, and known too late” (I.5.139-140). Juliet knows that by loving her family’s enemy she is rebelling against her family name. Yet, Juliet sees what the biased adults do not see; Romeo is a most desirable man with the wrong label, Montague, attached.

‘Tis but thy name that is my enemy;
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What’s Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O be some other name!
What’s in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet; (II.2.38-44)

Juliet wants Romeo even if he is a Montague. It is the man who is important to her, not the name of the man. Shakespeare is making a radical statement through Juliet; at this time in England, a person’s name or title was the most important status symbol; Juliet ignores what society says is important and listens to her heart.

According to David Bevington, it is Juliet who teaches Romeo about the “nature of true love. She will have none of his shopworn cliches learned in the service of Rosaline, his flowery protestations and swearing by the moon, lest they prove to be love’s perjuries. With her innocent candor, she insists (like many heroines of the romantic comedies) on dispelling the mask of pretense that lovers too often show one another” (Intro. Romeo 978). Juliet and Romeo meet with the priest and secretly marry. Juliet does the unthinkable by marrying without her parents’ permission. But she knew that they would not allow her to marry a sworn enemy.

Juliet continues to show more strength of character, more so than Romeo, even though Romeo has the benefit of the friendship of the honorable Friar Laurence and Juliet’s confidante is her coarse nurse. The threads of tragedy begin weaving their sorrowful tapestry. The day after their wedding Romeo’s love falters when he allows Mercutio to lure him into murdering Tybalt. Romeo is banished and must leave after one stolen night with Juliet in her chambers. Juliet’s heart is wracked with sorrow over her cousin’s death and Romeo’s banishment; it is then her mother tells her (on Monday) that she must marry Paris on Thursday. Juliet wonders why the haste and with humility tries to refuse her father: “Good father, I beseech you on my knees, / Hear me with patience but to speak a word” (III.5.158-159). Her father replies,

| Hang thee, young baggage, disobedient wretch! |
| I tell thee, what: get thee to church o’ Thursday |
| Or never look me in the face. (III.5.160-162) |

After a lengthy speech from her father telling her to marry Paris or he will disown her, Juliet begs her mother for help.

| O sweet my Mother, cast me not away! |
| Delay this marriage for a month, a week; |
| Or if you do not, make the bridal bed |
| In that dim monument, where Tybalt lies. (III.5.200-204) |
Juliet is clearly distraught, and her mother’s reply is a cold rebuff: “Talk not to me, for I’ll not speak a word. / Do as thou wilt, for I have done with thee” (III.5.204-205). One by one those that Juliet loves are turning their backs on her. Even her loving nurse; her close confidante, issues a final betrayal by advising Juliet to marry Paris even though this would mean eternal damnation for Juliet’s soul. Juliet sees the nurse for who she is and says of her, “Ancient Damnation! O most wicked fiend!” (III.5.237). Juliet shows an amazing presence of mind and calmness as she decides to go to Friar Laurence for help. Bevington says of Juliet, “[...] she proves herself remarkably able to bear misfortune” (Intro. Romeo 978). Goddard points out, “Juliet, in her chamber, deserted by father and mother and enticed to faithlessness by the Nurse, child as she is, never wavers for an instant, puts her tempter behind her, and consents as the price of her fidelity to be ‘buried’ alive” (1: 136.) Goddard explains, “Romeo, as we said, does not give quite ‘all’ for love. But Juliet does. She performs her miracle and receives supernatural strength as her reward” (1: 136). According to Goddard, Romeo is afflicted with weakness, but Juliet’s spirit eventually triumphs in him. “Here again the heroine transcends the hero” (1: 136).

Juliet, a brave rebel, faces the sleeping potion and burial in the tomb alone. “To describe as ‘supernatural’ the strength that enables Juliet ‘without fear or doubt’ to undergo the ordeal of the sleeping potion and the burial vault does not seem excessive: ‘Give me, give me! O! tell me not of fear’ [IV.2.121]” (Goddard 1: 136). The tragic tapestry weaves sorrow upon sorrow as Romeo does not receive the news of Juliet’s deathlike sleep. When he finds her, Romeo believes Juliet is dead and takes his own life by poisoning himself. Juliet awakens to find her lover dead. Taking Romeo’s dagger, Juliet breaks all the feminine stereotypes of her day by plunging the dagger into her heart and dying the way a man would die.

The tragedy of Romeo and Juliet reveals Juliet as a young rebel woman who breaks the rules of society and family to love and marry the man she chooses. She looks beyond labels and sees into the heart. When Juliet’s husband and lover, Romeo, dies tragically, she takes her life into her own hands. She does not allow herself to be tossed aside by her father, but Juliet hurls herself towards death by her own young hand and chooses her own fate.

Hermia and Juliet are both young rebels who want to choose their own husbands. While each marries the man of her choice, the result for Hermia is happiness and the consequence for Juliet is death.
Shakespeare’s Mature Lover

Beatrice from *Much Ado About Nothing*

Beatrice, like Adriana and Kate, is a woman of words, but she is not a shrew. Beatrice, like Hermia and Juliet, wants to marry the man of her choice, but this choice is more than a matter of the heart; it is about having a well-made match to her equal. For Beatrice to truly love a man, he must be worthy of respect and must be as intelligent and witty as she. Beatrice, appearing in the comedy *Much Ado About Nothing* written from the period of 1598 to 1600, is a more mature rebel who makes her own choices without threats of societal consequences. Shakespeare pushes against the bounds of societal norms by defining Beatrice as one treated equally by the men in the microcosm of the play. Although she does not have the influence of a mother or father, she is under the rule of her uncle, Leonato, who treats Beatrice with deference, which is highly unusual during this time period. Shakespeare demonstrates through Leonato’s handling of Beatrice, that she is a woman worthy of respect. According to Nadine Page of West Virginia University, “During the Renaissance a few writers still questioned even the possibility of woman’s soul. Generally, however, she was conceded this possession; but as in the Middle Ages, most people denied her a private will” (494). Page describes Beatrice, “She is not one of Shakespeare’s ‘romantic dreams,’ but a character well developed according to the Renaissance details of the ‘free’ woman: she is not inhibitive; her talk is frequent and Elizabethan in nature; she knows the kind of a husband she does not want; and she answers her own proposals of marriage” (498). Beatrice is a woman who knows what she wants and will speak her mind without apology or fear as she seeks it; and amazingly, the men let her do this. In fact, they respect and love her for her independence.

During a time in history when a woman’s role was to do all to please the men in her life, Beatrice seeks to please herself. She does not want to settle for just anyone as a husband. Beatrice describes her ideal man as a combination of Signor Benedick and Count John to Leonato. Leonato parrots her choice, “Than half Signor Benedick’s tongue in Count John’s mouth and half Count John’s melancholy in Signor Benedick’s face-” (II.1.10 -12). Beatrice replies: “With a good leg and a good foot, uncle, and money enough in his purse, such a man would win any woman in the world, if ‘a could get her good will” (II.1.13-15). Leonato tells Beatrice that she will never get a husband “[ . . ] if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue” (II.1.17). In the lines that follow, Beatrice wittily tells Leonato that is fine with her.

Beatrice’s other uncle, Antonio, speaks to her cousin, Hero, and says, “Well, niece, I trust you will be ruled by your father” (II.1. 47-48).
is Beatrice who replies, instructing Hero to please herself. “Yes, faith, it is
my cousin’s duty to make curtsy and say, ‘Father, as it please you.’ But yet
for all that, cousin, let him be a handsome fellow, or else make another
curtsy and say, ‘Father as it please me’” (II.1.49-52). It is clear that
Beatrice believes women are self aware about what brings them happiness
and that women should make their desires known and expect to be pleased.

Beatrice is single by choice. She cleverly uses flattery to turn
down a marriage proposal to a man she does not love, the Prince, Don
Pedro, “Your Grace is too costly to wear every day” (II.1.313). Page may
be partially right when she says that Beatrice is wise because she
understands that because of the Prince’s important position it may be
difficult to be married to him (497). But Bevington is more accurate stating
that “Beatrice remains single, not from love of spinsterhood, but from
insistence on a nearly perfect mate” (Intro. Much Ado 217). Benedick is
the one man whom Beatrice finds her equal and about whom she is
concerned. When she is first introduced, Beatrice wants to know if
Benedick made it safely back from the wars. Even though she inquires
about him in a jesting manner, Beatrice is concerned for Benedick.
Bevington explains, “Clearly they are fascinated with one another.
Beatrice’s questions in the first scene, although abusive in tone, betray her
concern for Benedick’s welfare” (Intro. Much Ado 217). Benedick is a
handsome well respected man; he is a successful warrior; and, like
Beatrice, he is intelligent and witty. “[. . .] he above all men in her
acquaintance, comes closest to her mark” (Bevington, Intro. Much Ado
217).

In spite of the fact that Benedick seems so well suited to Beatrice,
she is afraid of being hurt by him. Beatrice and Benedick are already
acquaintances when the play begins, and the past they share is stamped
with doubt that causes Beatrice to mistrust Benedick. Page points out lines
that occur later in the play to support this thought.

She taunts him for being insincere: she alludes to his eating
his words (IV, i, 286); confides that he “foreswore on
Tuesday morning” a thing he swore to her on Monday
night (V,i, 172); and declares to Don Pedro his
faithlessness as a lover: “Indeed, my lord, he lent it (his
heart) mee [sic] a while; and I gave him use for it, a double
heart for a single one, marry once before he wonne it of
mee [sic], with false dice, therefore your Grace may well
say I have lost it” (II,i,267). (497-498)

Being the confident woman she is, Beatrice masks her fear with a discourse
of pointed clever words and a cheerful demeanor.
When Benedick arrives in scene one, he verbally spars with Beatrice in a manner that shows they clearly enjoy one another’s company and are well suited for each other.

BENEDICK: What, my dear Lady Disdain! Are you still living?

BEATRICE: It is possible disdain should die while she that such meet food to feed it as Signor Benedick? Courtesy itself must convert to disdain, if you come in her presence.

BENEDICK: Then is courtesy a turncoat. But it is certain I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted; and I would I could find in my heart that I had not a hard heart, for I truly love none.

BEATRICE: A dear happiness to women! They would else have been troubled with a pernicious suitor. I thank God and my cold blood I am of your humor for that. I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me. (I.1.114-126)

Benedick must prove himself to Beatrice before she will reveal her feelings for him. Bevington points out, “The only fear preventing the revelation of her love—a not unnatural fear, in view of the insults she and Benedick exchange—is that he will prove faithless and jest at her weakness” (Intro. Much Ado 217). Through the helpful deceit of their friends, Beatrice and Benedick are assured that they are each loved by the other. Beatrice seems elated by this revelation, but yet Benedick still must prove himself true to Beatrice, which he does when dishonor threatens her beloved cousin.

Beatrice’s fierce loyalty to her cousin Hero, when Hero is falsely accused of infidelity, is an example of Beatrice’s strong rebellion against the patriarchal society. Hero’s own father turns immediately against his virtuous daughter when false charges are brought against her, at the instigation of Don John. Beatrice is shown to be wiser than the dominant men who should know that Don Pedro’s brother, Don John, is dishonest and conniving. The fact that Benedick is convinced by Beatrice to side with Hero and forsake his male bonds shouts loudly of his honor and respect for this woman’s wisdom.

BENEDICK: Think you in your soul the Count Claudio hath wronged Hero?

BEATRICE: Yea, as sure as I have a thought or a soul.

BENEDICK: Enough, I am engaged. I will challenge him. (IV.2.327-330)

Later, when they hear that Hero is vindicated from wrong-doing, Beatrice asks Benedick if he will go with her to hear the news. It is blatantly clear that Benedick is completely enamored of this strong independent woman,
Beatrice. “I will live in your heart, die in thy lap, and be buried in they eyes; and moreover I will go with thee to thy uncle’s” (V.2.95-97).

At the close of the play, Beatrice marries Benedick, the man of her choice, by her own free will. She found what she sought in a mate, an honorable man that is intelligent and clever. She will not be “[. . .] overmastered with a piece of wayward valiant dust” (II.1.57), nor will she be forced to “[. . .] make an account of her life to a wayward marl” (II.1.57). Shakespeare’s character, Beatrice, is a true breakthrough rebel woman in Renaissance times. When Beatrice weds Benedick, there is no question in the audience that this marriage is one of true love and true equality.

**Shakespeare’s Complete Woman**

Cordelia from *King Lear*

Shakespeare presents Cordelia, the culmination of a complete woman, in the tragedy *King Lear* written sometime between 1603-1605. Cordelia goes further than the more out-spoken Beatrice; while both women are virtuous and independent, Cordelia surpasses the bounds of womanhood and becomes a person who demonstrates a depth of character profoundly committed to her personal conscience. Cordelia’s rebellion has little to do with society and much to do with her own sense of right and wrong. Even though her physical presence is minimal in comparison to the length of the play, Cordelia’s influence is strongly felt on stage. Goddard comments on Cordelia’s ever present aura, “The best verbal embodiment I can think of for what Shakespeare’s magic gradually turns Cordelia into in our imaginations is that starry phrase of Emily Dickinson’s: Bright Absentee. *Bright Absentee:* that is exactly what Cordelia is during most of the play [. . .]” (2: 155). Cordelia’s love for her father is as true and bright as a shining star; as the play progresses the clarity of this truth glows more vibrant.

In the first scene of the play, Cordelia shows her morality by refusing to lie to please her father and to gain a huge inheritance. Order is tilted by Cordelia’s refusal to proclaim love for her father, King Lear, above all else as her two elder sisters have done. King Lear is dividing the kingdom between his three daughters, and he has saved the choicest land for his youngest daughter, Cordelia. Lear explains what he is bestowing upon her, “Remain this ample third for our fair kingdom, no less in space validity, and pleasure than that conferred on Goneril” (I.1.80-82). Lear invites Cordelia to proclaim her love for him. “Strive to be interested [sic], what can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak” (I.1.85-86). Cordelia shocks her father by replying, “Nothing my Lord”

CORDELIA: Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth. I love Your Majesty
According to my bond, no more nor less.
LEAR: How, how, Cordelia? Mend your speech a little,
Lest you may lose your fortunes. (I. 1.91-95)

It appears that Lear wants more devotion from his youngest daughter. Bevington states, “Goneril and Regan are content to flatter and promise obedience, knowing that they will turn him out once he has relinquished his throne” (Intro. King Lear 1169). Cordelia, though she greatly loves her father, will not lie in this way nor will she promise to love him undividedly. Cordelia, standing next to her two suitors, realizes that one day she must transfer her devotion to a husband and children. She boldly asks Lear, “Why have my sisters husbands if they say / They love you all?” (I.1.99-100). Cordelia promises, “Sure I shall never marry like my sisters / To love my father all” (I.1.103-104). Cordelia risks not only her inheritance, but her father’s love and approval for the sake of truthfulness.

The idea that Cordelia will have a divided devotion for her father when she marries seems to be what troubles King Lear the most. It is not enough that Cordelia promises to obey, honor, and love her father; he cannot bear the idea of a new priority in his daughter’s life. Bevington explains this further, “To Lear, as to other fathers contemplating a daughter’s marriage in late Shakespearean plays, this savors of desertion” (Intro. King Lear 1169). Lear does not allow his daughter to desert him; when he cannot possess her, he banishes her from his presence and strips her of her dowry. The noble France takes her for his wife and Cordelia’s physical presence slips into the background.

Cordelia could have easily played the game her father wanted her to play but she refuses to compromise her ideals and gives up her inheritance. Cordelia is rebelling against falsehood; furthermore, she does not want to have to pay for parental love. Material possessions and power do not motivate Cordelia; she has surpassed these earthly pursuits. Once she is banished, she does not resort to groveling to acquire favor with her father. She has been raised as royalty and demonstrates her regality through her calm, gentle acceptance. It is obvious by her parting words that Cordelia possesses not only regality but wisdom beyond her father’s because she is fully aware of her sisters’ deceit:

Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides;
Who covers faults, at last shame derides.
Well may you prosper. (I.1.284-286)
The wicked sisters may be able to hide their faults for a time, but they will be exposed for who they are.

When Cordelia appears in Act IV her true spirituality glows. She is very concerned for her father, and it is clear that she has forgiven him for wronging her, “Soon may I hear and see him [Lear]!” (IV.4.29). Upon seeing Lear she kisses him and exclaims,

O my dear Father! Restoration hang,
Thy medicine on my lips, and let this kiss
Repair those violent harms that my two sisters
Have in thy reverence made. (IV.7.26-29)

When Lear hears Cordelia speak, he thinks he is dead and she is a spirit. Goddard believes this is part of Shakespeare’s revelation of Cordelia. Goddard says of Lear, “[. . .] Lear was never before so near the mark. Cordelia, we know, is a spirit, and in that shining line [‘You are a spirit, I know’ (IV.7.50).], Shakespeare harvests the promise of the full four acts which have been subtly contrived to convince us of the same truth” (2: 156). This heroine seems to transcend not only her femaleness, but her humanness, with her pure ever present spirit.

Cordelia’s intentions are intentions of the best kind. She resists evil even when the cost is enormous for her and those she loves. Cordelia could not know that her refusal to put her father above all else would begin the catastrophic chain reaction of events that followed. A statement Cordelia makes to King Lear in scene five seems to have a twofold reference. “We are not the first / Who with best meaning have incurred the worst” (V.3.3-4). Ivor Morris of Gothenburg University believes that it could refer back to scene one.(158). Cordelia uses the word we to shows her generous heart; she does not believe that her father had ill intentions even though his actions toward her were cruel. At the same time these words seem to foreshadow what is to come. Although Lear and Cordelia are prisoners, this is not the worst; it is later when her dead body is in King Lear’s arms that all hearts are pierced. Perhaps it is Cordelia’s transcendent goodness that makes her death so hard to bear. Shakespeare shaped Cordelia as such a human character, flesh as we are flesh, complete with pain, love, and tears. Cordelia is the Bright Absentee rebelling against evil and perishing for it.

Conclusion

William Shakespeare shattered the conventions of English society during the Renaissance period concerning women by creating well-rounded female characters that pressed against limiting societal boundaries. As one follows the plays of Shakespeare in chronological order, the female characters he creates become more realistic and complex in nature. Adriana
and Kate are labeled as stereotypical shrews, but Shakespeare fashions these women in such a way that the audience has empathy for them. Adriana grabs hearts with her eloquent plea to the Duke concerning her husband, and sharp-tongued Kate is so endeared to the audience that they glow in her triumph over her sister and the widow. Hermia and Juliet stretch the bounds further than Adrianna and Kate; both young rebel women look death in the face as they defy their fathers and society by choosing their own mates. Shakespeare then pens Beatrice, a mature woman who not only speaks her own mind as Hermia and Juliet do, but is respected and loved for it. Late in his career, a mature Shakespeare models a new female heroine that is heroic not because she is a woman, but because she is person of deep moral integrity. Cordelia shines as a complete woman.

It is clear throughout his writings that William Shakespeare respected women. He saw them as valuable human beings as he fashioned heroines with strong wills who were able to make hard choices. Julie Hankey quotes author Anna Jamison [1833] about Shakespeare, “He looked ‘upon women with the spirit of humanity, wisdom, and deep love’ and was therefore able to do ‘justice to their natural good tendencies and kindly sympathies.’ In this way he came to stand as the patron saint of Woman” (427). Shakespeare dared to create interesting and complex female characters; he makes known his progressive thinking through the lines his rebel women speak.
Shakespeare’s Rebel Women

Works Cited

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