Cassandra J. McGuyrt
Professor J. Fleming
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Shakespeare as Feminist


Catherine Belsey’s article, *Feminism and Beyond*, looks deeply into the feminist readings of early works of literature. She explains that one can only truly understand feminism by understanding the cultural history and context of the times. Her perspective on the subject matter provides insight into many of Shakespeare’s female character, including Portia and Desdemona. Belsey explains that Shakespeare and his work reflect his culture and the society in which he and his work were created. More importantly, he and his work reflect human nature. What is personal to his characters also becomes political to his characters, as is the case with the changing realms of feminism through the years.

Belsey’s work provides an understanding of Shakespeare and work, while also providing revelations into his strong female characters. This piece will help to build the body of evidence to support the idea that Shakespeare supported the liberation and expression of women, specifically through his creation of strong female characters.


In Steve Cassal’s, *Shakespeare’s Othello*, readers are presented with a concise breakdown of the play itself and its major female characters of Desdemona and Emilia.
Cassal explains that Othello is the personification of honor, where Desdemona is the personification of chastity. Throughout the work their personifications are challenged by the ideals of honesty and loyalty. Cassal looks to the characters social standing, their personal loyalties, and he re-orders the values within the play to discuss the various outcomes. He also discusses the different expectations for men and women in regards to the pillars of honesty, integrity and loyalty. In the end he compares Desdemona to Emilia and discusses the transformation Emilia undergoes in her final moments to uphold the beliefs and truths of her dear friend. While this is a brief work it is heavy with meaning. It provides insight into the main characters within *Othello,* and specifically looks into Desdemona and Emilia in explicating the true meaning of the work itself. Cassal’s article will be helpful in establishing an overall understanding of the play, as well as helping to build evidence for the perspective that Shakespeare was a feminist before his time.


Jane Donawerth is a teacher by nature, hence her article *Teaching Shakespeare in the Context of Renaissance Women’s Culture.* The title of her article explains exactly what she sets out to do. Overall, it is a discussion of her experiences in teaching Shakespeare, but it also gets into the specifics of the context of the Renaissance, and more so the context of women’s culture during that time period. While all of this is going on through the work, there is also an essence of feminist theory that backs up Donawerth’s ideas. This piece will help to lay the groundwork of Renaissance England, as well as the context
of women’s culture during this time period. It will also provide a unique perspective on interpreting Shakespeare and his strong female characters.


Linda T. Fitz’s work, “‘What Says the Married Woman’: Marriage Theory and Feminism in the English Renaissance,” is a body of work that explores ideals that were vital components of society during Shakespeare’s time, also while adding an element of feminism to the mix. Within the work, Fitz looks for the origins of English and North American Feminism rooted in the English Renaissance. This is because authors like William Shakespeare provide so many female characters to work with. She begins with the Renaissance view of women, and marriage, and builds her ideals from there.

Specifically, she looks at what features of this viewpoint have paved the way to modern feminist attitudes and which have not. She uses work like the *Merchant of Venice*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to build her body of evidence to back up her thinking. This body of work will help to explore the realms of women during the Renaissance era, and how much of what is depicted in Shakespeare’s work paved the way for generations of feminism to grow and flourish. It will also help to support the idea that through the creation of strong female characters, Shakespeare supported the expression and equality of women.

Within Sidney L. Gulick Jr.’s article, *Was “Shakespeare” a Woman?*, is a deeply rooted argument presented in a concise manner. The author explores the possibilities of Shakespeare’s true identity and bases the argument on Shakespeare’s favoritism towards women. Overall, Shakespeare depicts his women with superb delicacy and immense understanding; which begs the question, how could a man do this so well? Gulick delves into the moral and intellectual aspects of Desdemona, Emilia, Lady Macbeth, Goneril, Regan, Cordelia and Portia. Not only are these women depicted as morally superior, but they are also more intellectual than their male counterparts. This body of work explores and explicates on the ideals of Shakespeare’s female characters, which help to further build on the ideals of the creation of his strong female roles within his works. It will also help to support the overall ideal that Shakespeare was an early feminist in his portrayals of women.


In Julie Hankey’s article, *Victorian Portias: Shakespeare’s Borderline Heroine*, insights into the female characters of William Shakespeare, as well as deep revelations about Portia specifically can be discovered. Hankey’s work deals with the perceptions of Shakespeare’s women in the afterlives of his work. She looks to the first interpretations of the women through the eyes of the Victorians, then moves to the eyes of the Romantics. Many generations of scholars found a way to lift of Shakespeare’s female characters while still putting them down, believing that his women were still less
interesting than his men. Hankey hones in on the works of Anna Jameson to further explicate her ideals on this subject, and then moves to focus on the character of Portia specifically. She plays with the idea that Shakespeare’s female characters only exist in their attachment to specific male characters. She also delves into the perceptions of these women in regards to their power and intellect; further explaining that the intellect and power of women bears the same relation to men as their physical stature. Using Portia she attempts to shatter these perceptions and illustrates that not only is Portia a probable heroine in Shakespeare’s work, but the world in which she exists is also highly probable. This article from Hankey will provide deep insight into the character of Portia, as well as insight into Shakespeare’s female characters overall. This insight will be useful in building an evidence base to support the idea that Shakespeare was a feminist before his time.


Courtney Lehmann’s, Crouching Tiger, Hidden Agenda: How Shakespeare and the Renaissance are Taking the Rage Out of Feminism, is a work that delves deeply into twenty-first century feminism, while at the same time giving due diligence to Shakespeare and the Renaissance. This article looks at the rise of Shakespeare in Hollywood, in relation to the retreat of feminism to Hollywood. Lehmann studies the recent films like Elizabeth (1998), A Midsummer Night’s Dream (1999), and Shakespeare in Love (1998) to build her body of evidence. She explores these pieces in relation to
their original counterparts, in the context of Elizabethan England, and their messages about feminism. This work will help to build a body of evidence supporting the idea that Shakespeare was a feminist before his time. It provides a unique perspective on both feminism and Shakespeare, and will help to explore these ideas further.


Claire McEachern’s article, *Fathering Herself: A Source Study of Shakespeare’s Feminism*, is a piece rooted in Feminism that takes a strategic look into the works of William Shakespeare. More specifically, it is a piece that looks at Shakespeare’s work in a variety of cultural contexts, both historical and present. Terms that come to light are “proto-feminism” and “Patriarchal Shakespeare.” Both terms play a pivotal role in the explanation of McEachern’s ideals. She takes a look at Shakespeare’s cultural voice and what he has to say about the times, the people, the politics through his writings. Rather than looking at his work as something made up by additions and subtractions of characters, settings and themes, she re-imagines his work as culturally determined readings of the context in which Shakespeare lived and breathed; more so the contexts he found most provocative for creating his work. McEachern explains that feminism has found an apparent commitment to the portrayal of liberated female characters; they are strong in voice and in action. But Shakespeare, using his freedom from cultural assumption creates women strong in voice and in action, but that are bound by their relationships, political ideologies, and familial loyalties. This body of work provides
insight into reading Shakespeare from a feminist perspective, and further provides explanation of Shakespeare’s strong female characters.


The work of Martha Ronk in Desdemona’s Self-Presentation is deep and immense. Ronk sets out to characterize Desdemona throughout Shakespeare’s work Othello. Not only does she work to characterize her at different points throughout the play, but she works to demystify how she presents herself to her various audiences. At the onset of the article Ronk explains that the most telling moments in a character’s evolution are the moments in which they stand apart from themselves. In such moments they create a truly dramatic persona and they offer a visual allegory for themselves as characters, and to their audience. Next, she looks to the idea of “interiority,” explaining that characters, like people, have interior and exterior selves that exist and inform each other – thus creating the overall projection of self to other. After laying the groundwork Ronk moves to Desdemona specifically and begins building her philosophy of her. She looks at Desdemona’s assertive presence overall, her relation to Othello and her father, and her eventual downfall. Ronk’s work provides immense insight into the play and to the character of Desdemona. Her work is rooted in evidence and is thoroughly explanatory. Using this work will help build understanding of Desdemona as a strong female character and will be useful as evidence in explaining Shakespeare’s perception of women.

In the work of Robin Russin, The Triumph of the Golden Fleece: Women, Money, Religion, and Power in Shakespeare’s the Merchant of Venice, she explores exactly what the title alludes to. Under a microscope she studies the lives of the two main female characters in the play. First is Portia a Christian’s daughter; then Jessica, a Jew’s daughter. Both girls are burdened to challenge their father’s will, and each acts as an opposite of the other. Together their characters create an interesting subplot to the overall work that explores the female side of things within the context of the culture. While the play is described as a comedy, it can also be viewed as much more than a love story, more so a love of money story. It explores the themes of lust, avarice, retribution, jealousy, sexual deceit, cruelty, religious conflict, and financial, moral and emotional bankruptcy. Just exploring these themes makes the play feel much more like a tragedy of human greed. Russin works to explore the female characters, their male counterparts and the context in which they all exist. The insight her work provides will help to build a better understanding of Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice, while also helping to build evidence to support the idea behind Shakespeare’s strong female characters.

Neil Smith and Everett Siegel explore Desdemona and her internal character deeply in their work *Desdemona’s Inner Conflicts*. Using psychoanalysis they probe into Desdemona’s irrational and self-defeating behavior. They look into her personal, familial and cultural “traumas” to explain her behavior and her inevitable demise. Smith and Siegel explain that Desdemona is made up of a constant push and pull between submission and aggression, which adds to her complexity as a character. When she conforms to the ideals of those around her she submits to the Renaissance stereotype of a good woman. But when her aggression comes into the mix she becomes vibrant and powerful, while being powerless because of her womanhood. The authors look to the relationship between Desdemona’s personality, Elizabethan culture and psychoanalysis to deeply explain her. This information will be vital in exploring and explaining the strong character that is Desdemona. In proving that Shakespeare was a feminist before his time this information will help to illustrate his proclivity in creating strong female characters to support his personal beliefs.