

Year 9 Knowledge Organiser: Shakespeare's Women

This unit focusses on a selection of female characters created in Shakespeare's plays and analyses their characterisation from a modern perspective, informed by the historical context of The Renaissance.

Context

- **William Shakespeare** (bapt. 26 April 1564 – 23 April 1616) was an English playwright, poet and actor. He is widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's greatest dramatist. He is often called England's national poet and the "Bard of Avon" (or simply "**the Bard**"). His works, including collaborations, consist of some 39 plays, 154 sonnets, three long narrative poems, and a few other verses, some of uncertain authorship. His plays have been translated into every major living language and are performed more often than those of any other playwright. He remains arguably the most influential writer in the English language, and his works continue to be studied and reinterpreted.
- **Elizabeth I** (7 September 1533 – 24 March 1603) was Queen of England and Ireland from 17 November 1558 until her death in 1603. Sometimes referred to as **the Virgin Queen**, Elizabeth was the last of the five monarchs of the House of Tudor.
- **James VI and I** (19 June 1566 – 27 March 1625) was King of Scotland as **James VI** from 24 July 1567 and King of England and Ireland as **James I** from the union of the Scottish and English crowns on 24 March 1603 until his death in 1625. The kingdoms of Scotland and England were individual sovereign states, with their own parliaments, judiciaries, and laws, though both were ruled by James in personal union.

Characters

Lady Macbeth: an antagonist in *Macbeth*. She is the wife of Macbeth, the Thane (lord) of Galmis and Cawdor (2 areas of Scotland). She is manipulative and plays a key role in convincing her husband to betray King Duncan of Scotland in an effort to make her and Macbeth the ruling monarchs of the country.

Emilia: the maidservant of Desdemona and wife of the villainous Iago in *Othello*. She is loyal to Desdemona and is a spirited, free-thinking woman who has some radical opinions on society's treatment of women.

Ophelia: is the tragic heroine and past lover of the titular tragic hero in *Hamlet*. She is a caring confidante to the erratic prince of Denmark and also the dutiful daughter of Polonius. Driven to madness, she eventually meets an early death in a watery grave.

Juliet Capulet: one of the titular "star-crossed lovers" in *Romeo & Juliet*. She is the obedient daughter of Lord & Lady Capulet until she secretly marries her true love, Romeo Montague: a rival of House Capulet.

Beatrice: the atypically feisty and sharp-witted romantic heroine of *Much Ado About Nothing*. She is tricked into falling in love with Benedick, a soldier, after rumours spread they are in love with one another.

The Weird Sisters: another of the antagonists of *Macbeth*. These supernatural creatures are witches with the ability to look into the future and influence Macbeth in convincing him it is his destiny to be king.

Desdemona: the tragic heroine of *Othello*. She is the dutiful wife of Othello, a general in the Venetian army. She is the victim of Othello's ruthless passions as the villain of the play, Iago, convinces Othello that Desdemona is unfaithful to him. She is loyal to her husband and accepting of her duties as a woman in Venetian society.

Cordelia: the meek but dutiful daughter of the titular ruler in *King Lear*, based on the legendary Queen Cordelia. She is the youngest of King Lear's three daughters, and his favourite. After her elderly father offers her the opportunity to profess her love to him in return for one third of the land in his kingdom, she refuses and is banished for the majority of the play.

Titania: the Queen of the Fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. She is the husband of jealous King Oberon and is a proud, outspoken ruler of her fairies which incites her husband's actions to have his servant Puck manipulate her with his magic into making a fool of herself.

Themes

Justice & equality

Independence & individuality

Duty & devotion

Love & romance

Key vocabulary

Patriarchy/patriarchal

Feminism

Inequality

Oppression

Desolate

Supernatural

Pathetic fallacy

Misogyny

Soliloquy

Tyranny