

THE WOMAN'S PART

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN SHAKESPEARE

In Shakespeare's plays, some women are filled with folly. Others are quick-witted and kind. And still others are shrewd and ambitious. It is, perhaps, impossible to define the average Shakespearean woman. While many of the bard's depictions are questionable by today's standards, others show women in trailblazing and powerful roles that ran counter to the patriarchal norms of Elizabethan England. Women in Shakespeare remain some of the most iconic figures in literature and continue to inspire audiences across the world.

LEADING LADIES



CLEOPATRA

Antony and Cleopatra

Shakespeare's depiction of the Egyptian queen is one of contradictions. Cleopatra is petulant and self-absorbed, but also an incredibly charismatic and capable leader. She manipulates her lover, Mark Antony, both out of jealous rage and for political gain. Even her suicide by snakebite serves dual purposes, allowing her to not only reunite with Antony in death, but also avoid imprisonment by her enemy Julius Caesar.

Signature line: Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have immortal longings in me.'



LADY MACBETH

Macbeth

Cunning and cutthroat, Lady Macbeth is one of literature's most enduring embodiments of ambition and its consequences. After convincing her husband to murder the King of Scotland, she ascends to the throne and begins a reign of terror while wrestling with the morality of her actions. Eventually, tortured into insomnia and madness by her guilt, Lady Macbeth takes her life off-stage.

Signature line: Look like th' innocent flower but be the serpent under 't.

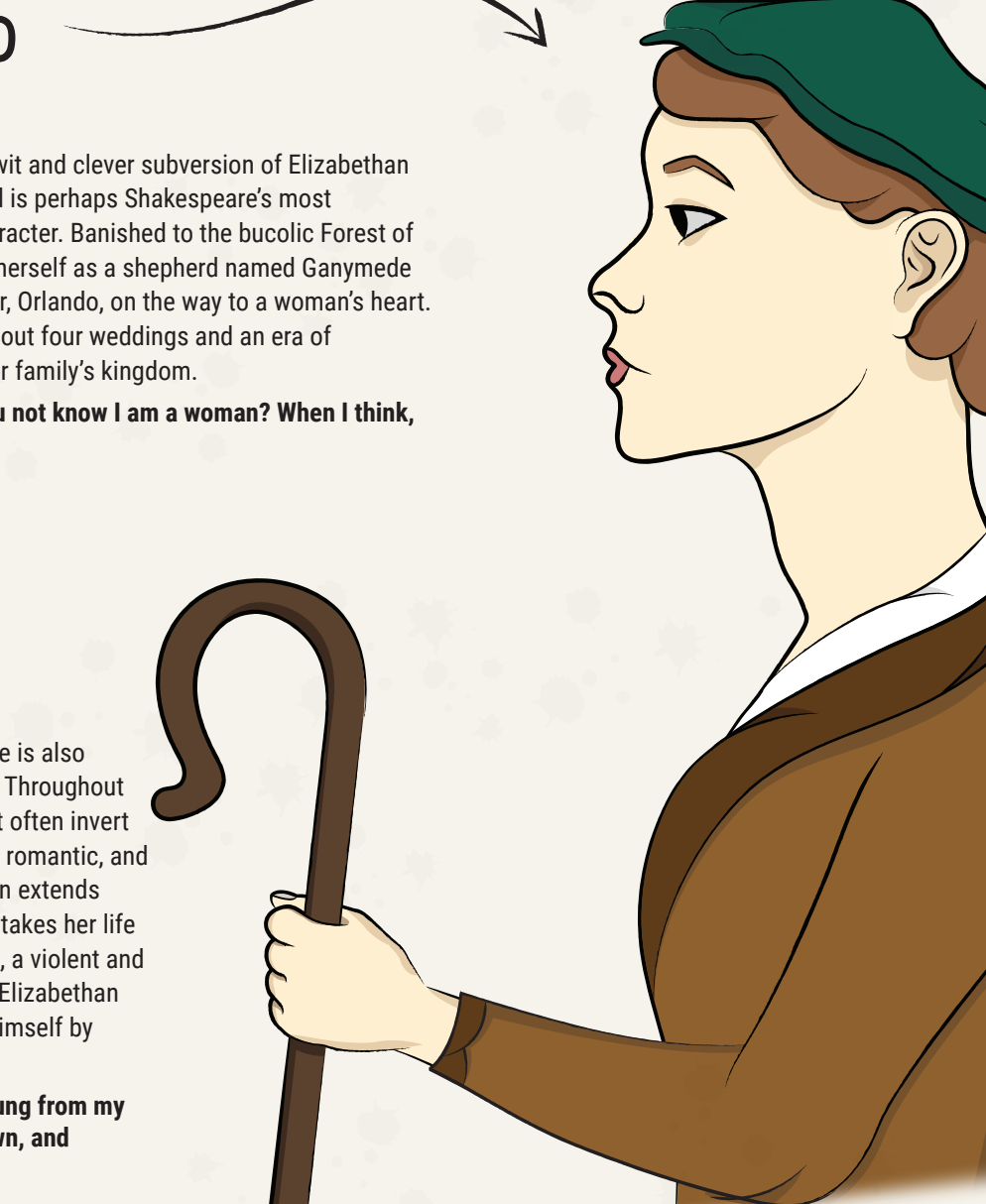


ROSALIND

As You Like It

Marked by her sharp wit and clever subversion of Elizabethan gender roles, Rosalind is perhaps Shakespeare's most ambitious female character. Banished to the bucolic Forest of Arden, she disguises herself as a shepherd named Ganymede and counsels her lover, Orlando, on the way to a woman's heart. Her schemes bring about four weddings and an era of newfound peace in her family's kingdom.

Signature line: Do you not know I am a woman? When I think, I must speak.

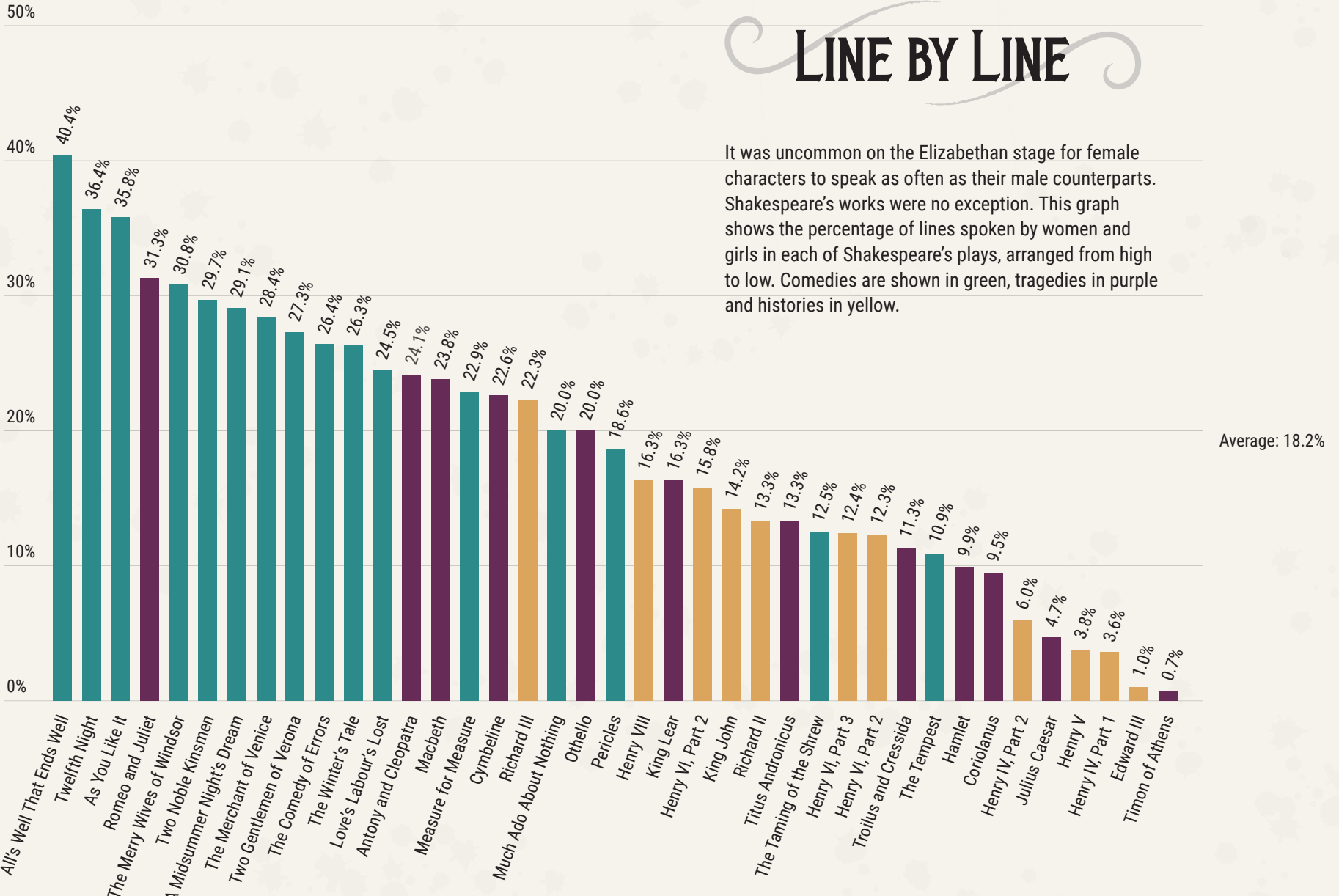


JULIET

Romeo and Juliet

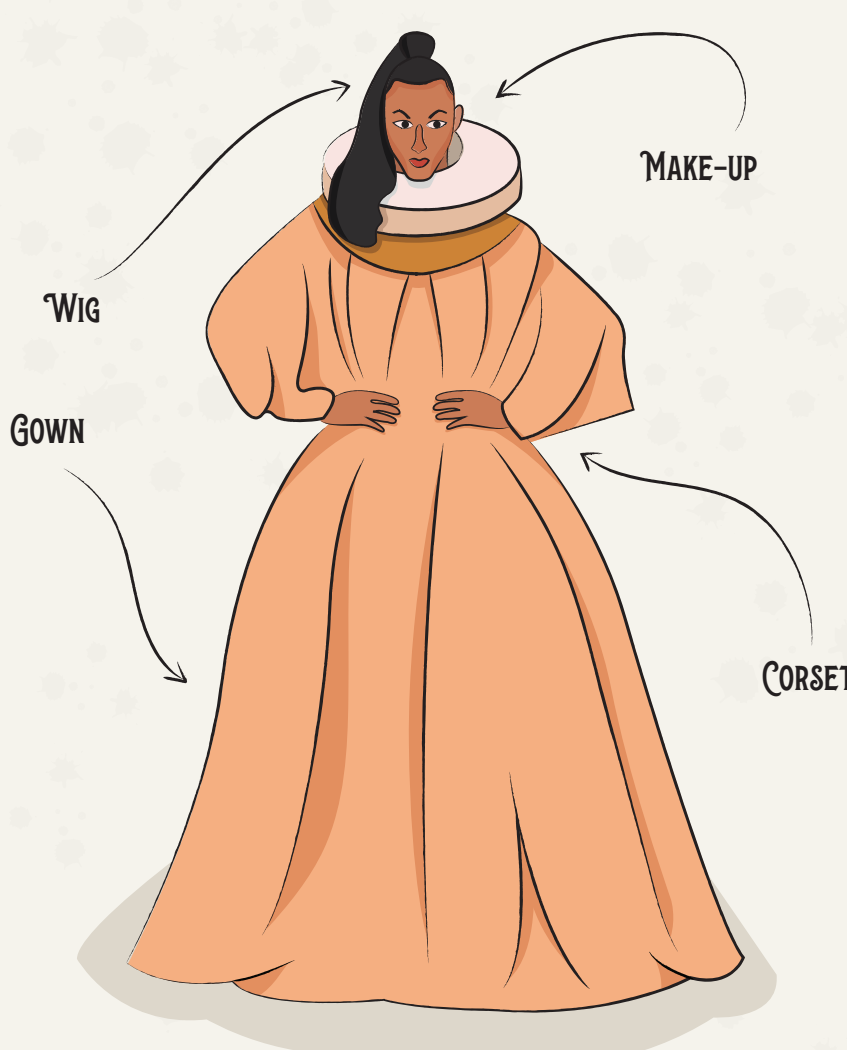
Shakespeare's most iconic couple is also among his most unconventional. Throughout their courtship, Romeo and Juliet often invert traditional gender roles; he is the romantic, and she the pragmatist. This inversion extends even to their deaths, when Juliet takes her life by plunging a dagger in her heart, a violent and highly masculinized act in the Elizabethan world. Romeo, meanwhile, kills himself by drinking poison.

Signature line: My only love sprung from my only hate, too early seen unknown, and known too late!



LINE BY LINE

It was uncommon on the Elizabethan stage for female characters to speak as often as their male counterparts. Shakespeare's works were no exception. This graph shows the percentage of lines spoken by women and girls in each of Shakespeare's plays, arranged from high to low. Comedies are shown in green, tragedies in purple and histories in yellow.



DRAGGED OUT

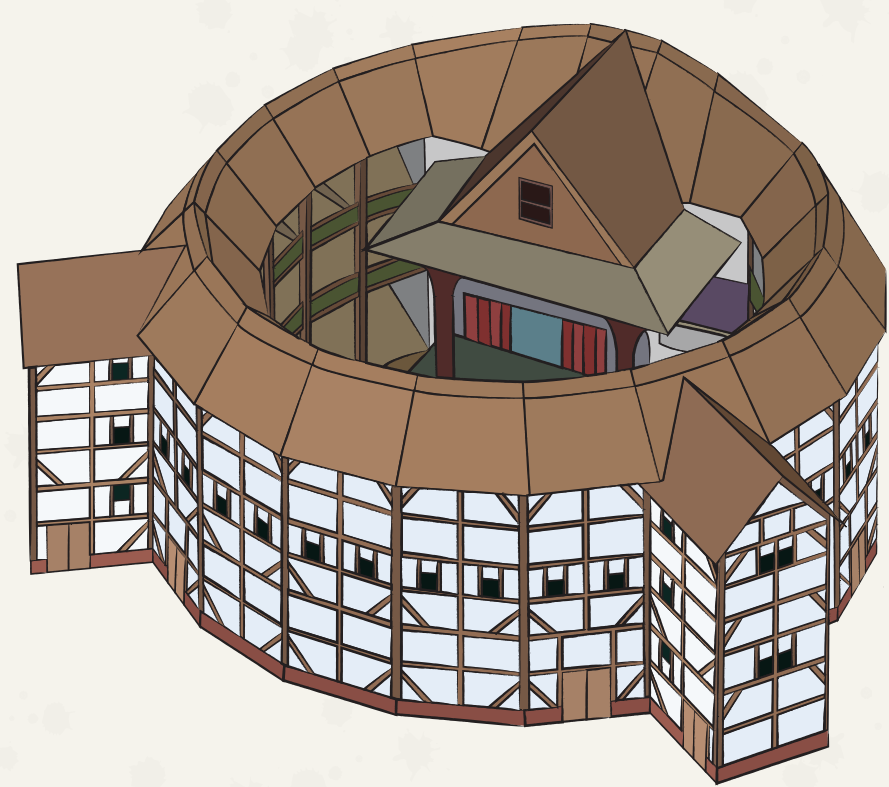
In Shakespeare's day, women were not allowed to act in the theater—so female roles were played by men. This added an extra layer of intrigue to plays like *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night*, which feature female characters who disguise themselves as men.

Gender swaps were, in fact, so common in Shakespearean drama that some scholars have suggested he coined the term "drag." Originally an acronym for the stage direction "Dressed resembling a girl," drag has evolved into an art form that celebrates exaggerated gender expression. A 2015 episode of RuPaul's Drag Race paid homage to Shakespeare by challenging contestants to reenact scenes from *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

A MODERN TWIST

When Shakespeare's Globe was reconstructed in 1997, architectural affinity to the original theater was a priority. But artistically, the Globe has pushed boundaries with the bard's writing. "That is what Shakespeare was doing within the limiting constraints of the time he was writing in," said artistic director Michelle Tracy. "We don't have those constraints anymore."

Since joining the Globe in 2018, Tracy has staged gender-blind productions of *Hamlet*, *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *The Tempest*. She challenges actors to capture a character's essence beyond their gender.



SHAKESPEARE'S GLOBE FAST FACTS

Location:	London, UK	Capacity:	1,400
Built:	1997	Yearly Revenue:	£24 million (\$31 million)
Based on:	Original theaters where Shakespeare staged plays in the 16th and 17th centuries	Mission:	Use the power of performance to make Shakespeare accessible for all

Sources: The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, PlayShakespeare.com, Shakespeare's Globe, Bowling Green University Multicultural Affairs, The Independent