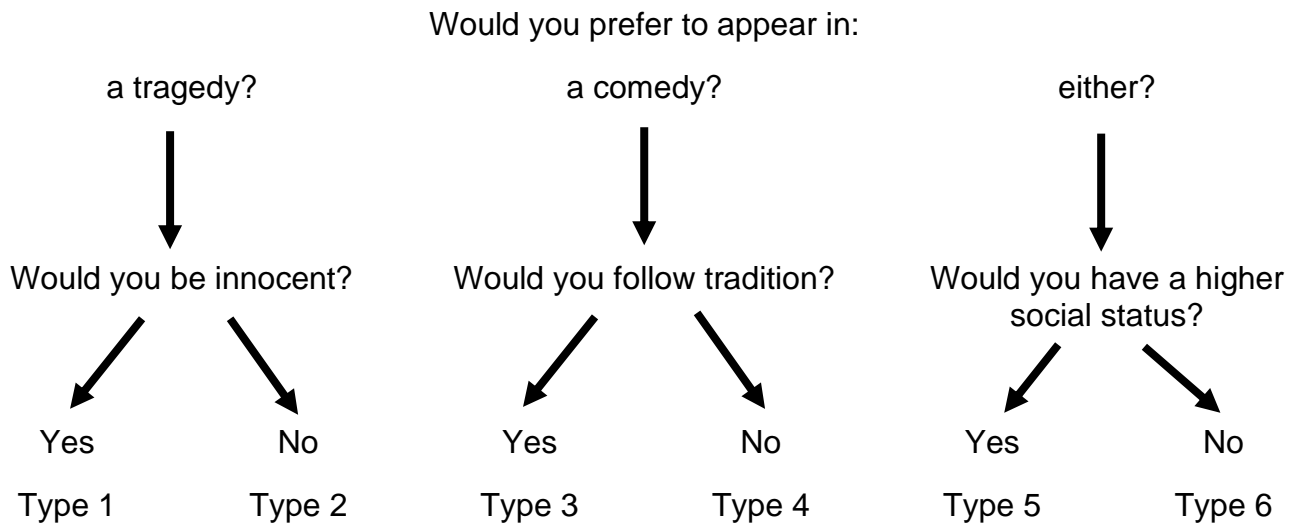# Women in Shakespeare's Plays

Task 1: You are an actor, and you are going to play one of Shakespeare's female characters. Answer the questions to find out which role is best for you.

Would you prefer to appear in:

a tragedy?	a comedy?	either?
Would you be innocent?	Would you follow tradition?	Would you have a higher social status?

Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4	Type 5	Type 6

Task 3: Read the text.

What choice for women in Shakespeare's day?

Ideal women

In Shakespeare's times, women had little choice in many of the important decisions in life. People believed girls should follow the rules set by their fathers, and after marriage a woman became financially dependent on her husband by law. The image of the 'perfect wife' was someone who was charming and obedient.

In contrast, Shakespeare's plays often portray women who are strong, rebellious and independent, and some are even responsible for murder! There are innocent women, like Cordelia in 'King Lear' and Desdemona in 'Othello', who try to follow society's ideal; however, these often end the play virtuous but dead.

Educating future wives

Formal schooling for girls in Shakespeare's day ended when they were young. Lessons for most of Shakespeare's female audience were limited to what was needed to become a wife, mother and manager of the household or farm. Uneducated women like the bawdy Nurse in 'Romeo and Juliet' were popular figures in plays but were not considered suitable choices as a wife.

Inside the wealthier houses, where many of Shakespeare's plays were set, parents employed personal tutors to teach their daughters to be charming young women. Girls studied arts such as languages, sewing, music and dancing. This education was planned to help them attract possible

suitors and make suitable marriages. Even when they are lost on an island at sea, Miranda's father in 'The Tempest' works hard as her schoolmaster to make sure she will be able to get married.

Deceivers and witches

However, many of Shakespeare's female characters used their skills to charm and deceive husbands and fathers for their own reasons, often ending in tragedy. In 'King Lear', scheming daughters Goneril and Regan tell King Lear how much they love him so they can take his power, then they reject him, driving him mad. And when, in 'Othello', the innocent Desdemona tries to use her charm to help a friend, she is wrongly accused of deceit and her death follows.

Deceit and charms were also linked to magic and witches, a commonly occurring theme in Shakespeare's day. Most of those accused of being witches were unmarried women. The scheming Lady Macbeth in 'Macbeth' goes to visit witches for help with her plans, and, although she is not single, Lady Macbeth was clearly very different to society's ideal obedient, passive wife.

Shakespeare led the way

Overall, women had a hard time in Shakespeare's day. A girl was expected to live by the rules of her father and then her husband. If she tried to do something different in her life she could be judged very harshly by society.

Shakespeare's female characters, however, often broke the rules. An audience would have been very shocked by the character of Viola, an independent-minded female who pretends to be a man in 'Twelfth Night'. And it is not surprising that the first woman to work as a professional actor in England was in a Shakespeare play.

Discuss questions 1-4 about the text.

1. What was the ideal woman like in Shakespeare's day?
2. What was education for girls like? Why were they educated?
3. How did Shakespeare's female characters reflect society of the time? Give two examples.
4. How were Shakespeare's female characters different to society's ideal? Give two examples.

Task 4: Find adjectives in the text which mean the following. Write them in the table.

1. pleasing and attractive	
2. willing to do what somebody has told him or her to do	
3. behaving in a way that is not expected	
4. having high moral standards	

Types of female characters in Shakespeare's plays

Type 1: You would play a tragically innocent character. These women typically have a high social status. They start the play naïve and innocent, pure and chaste. During the course of the play, they lose their innocence and naivety with tragic consequences. An example is Cordelia in the play 'King Lear'. She is punished for her refusal to lie to her father, the King, and ultimately dies a tragic death.

Type 2: You would play a scheming, ambitious character. These women are intelligent and powerful and manipulate the men around them. However, this leads to their downfall. In the tragedy 'Macbeth', Lady Macbeth convinces her husband to commit murder in order for him to become king. As her husband becomes more and more violent, she struggles with her guilt and kills herself.

Type 3: You would play one of Shakespeare's passive heroines. These women are young and of noble birth. They are married to another character from a family of equal status. Decisions are made for them by their families or husbands. You could play Miranda in the comedy 'The Tempest'. She falls in love with Ferdinand and their engagement unites the characters of the play and creates peace.

Type 4: You would play one of the female characters who don't follow traditions, such as one of the characters who dresses and acts as a man. This gives the characters the same freedoms and powers that men have. You could play Viola in Shakespeare's comedy 'Twelfth Night'. Viola is marooned on the shore of Illyria in a shipwreck. She disguises herself as a boy and gets a job.

Type 5: You could play the role of a character such as Katherine in Shakespeare's comedy 'The Taming of the Shrew' or Beatrice in the play 'Much Ado About Nothing'. These women are intelligent and witty. They are bold and independent and have no desire to marry. They are however 'tamed' and married by the end of the plays.

Type 6: You could play one of Shakespeare's bawdy women. These characters usually have a lower social status, and because of this they can talk and act in ways which women of higher classes cannot, for example they can be cheeky and flirtatious. They are usually secondary characters and can appear in comedies or tragedies. You could play Juliet's nurse in the tragedy 'Romeo and Juliet'.