

With William Shakespeare's 462nd birthday coming up on April 23, t20s delves deep into the Bard's enduring resonance

SHAKESPEARE AND THE MAKING OF FEMINIST CLASSROOMS

Centuries after his passing, the Bard still teaches students that power, agency, and authority are not inherently male traits alone

My 13-year-old cousin has just stepped into class VIII and calls me, very excitedly, one day to announce that they are to start studying Shakespeare this year. "We will do the courtroom scene (from *The Merchant of Venice*)," he tells me importantly, which comes to me as a bit of a surprise. Many years ago, when I was in Class VIII, we did two terms of Charles and Mary Lamb — and by far lighter plays, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest* — before we moved on to the original *The Merchant of Venice* in Class XI. The ICSE syllabus has changed, but only slightly; my cousin also tells me that his class will study *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth* in the near future. These are both heavy plays, and certainly not the ones my year did when we were in school. I only studied *Macbeth* for the first time at the undergraduate level myself.

However that may be, what my cousin recounts is a scene that has been playing out in thousands of urban Indian classrooms for the past many years, wherein a middle-school teacher opens a textbook to an excerpt from Shakespeare and introduces a whole generation to the world's greatest playwright for the first time. In my case and in my cousin's, the first time we really encounter the Bard is when we are 13 or 14 years old, and both times, it is through *The Merchant of Venice*. Both times, we first see his genius in that most famous of courtroom scenes, in which Shylock makes an impossible, but justified, demand, in which Antonio stands reluctant and resigned to his fate. In that significant moment in the play, there exists a hopeless situation — an antagonist demands a pound of flesh, and a merchant is ready to give up his life to meet that condition, knowing he has run out of options. And then, roaring into battle, there is the impact of Portia, who simply walks in and wins the day without anyone knowing who she really is — including her own (frankly incompetent) husband.

It is a significant moment in the school curriculum, especially when one considers that Portia has spent the majority of *The Merchant of*

Venice being bartered by the terms of her late father's will. She has had to suffer foolish suitors choosing between caskets, and has had virtually no agency throughout, until the moment she walks into that courtroom disguised as a young male lawyer and starts to call the shots in a way that no one dares to counter-question her. She dismantles Shylock's legal case with one of the most brilliantly precise arguments in all of dramatic literature, and saves Antonio's life, all while exposing the law's absurdity while working entirely within it. The most important part is that she wins her case almost effortlessly.

This, we note, is the first Shakespeare that most Indian children — at least in the current generation — ever meet. A young woman who, despite seeming to be without any agency of her own, saves not only her husband's best friend's life, but the very idea of justice in that room. The middle-school teachers know it is radical, for it would not be Shakespeare if it weren't. It is radical. It is feminist. And for a 13-year-old boy to call his older cousin one day to announce to her proudly that he is excited to finally start reading it for himself, it is exactly what is necessary.

THE ANATOMY OF SHAKESPEAREAN FEMINISM

It is important to be precise here, because slapping the word 'feminist' onto a 16th-century playwright requires some intellectual care. Shakespeare did not use the word, nor did he attend consciousness-raising camps or pen feminist manifestos. He was, quite simply, a commercial playwright trying to fill a theatre. And yet, across his 38 plays, he created a body of female characters so fully realised, morally complex, and intellectually formidable, that scholars have been arguing about their depths and dimensions for the past few centuries.

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William Shakespeare

philosophy, while Beatrice, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, refuses to be silent or deferential in any social situation — she matches every man in wit and surpasses most of them. Rosalind in *As You Like It*, disguised as a man, orchestrates an entire romantic plot with the precision of a surgeon. Viola in *Twelfth Night* navigates grief, cross-dressing, and unrequited love with more clarity than any of the men around her. Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* pursues what she wants without apology. And then there are his darker, more difficult women: Lady Macbeth, who is essentially the chief engine of the play that bears her husband's name, who is more ruthless, more decisive, more strategically clear-headed than Macbeth himself, and is unravelled not by weakness but by the sheer weight of what she has done. Cleopatra, who is arguably the most completely drawn character in the entire canon — mercurial, political, funny, tragic, impossible to reduce. Gertrude, whose silence and apparent complicity in *Hamlet* is itself a kind of characterisation. These are not cardboard women, nor are they accessories to male plots; in fact, they are far from it.

Even in the tragedies, where women so often suffer — and suffer they do, terribly — Shakespeare gives his women the dignity of interiority. Ophelia is tragic not because she is weak, but because the systems around her — her father, her brother, Hamlet, the court — constantly deny her the space to be anything but. Desdemona's virtue is far from naivety; it is a specific moral commitment that the play asks us to take seriously. The women in Shakespeare, regardless of gravity of character, are complex, as equally, if not more, as the men, and punishment, if and when it comes, is structural; a far more sophisticated feminist observation than what many modern texts manage to pull off. Not to forget, all these characters were written at a time when women were not even permitted to perform on stage. Every Portia, every Beatrice, every Rosalind, every Lady Macbeth — every woman Shakespeare ever wrote — was originally played by a boy. The female strength in Shakespeare's work was written into existence in the near-complete absence of actual women on stage, which is not incidental as much as it is astonishing.

THE INDIAN CLASSROOM AND SPECIFIC STAKES

Now place this in urban India in 2026. The Class VIII student encountering Portia for the first time is, statistically, likely to be in a city — Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Calcutta. She is probably from a family where both parents work, where smartphones are standard, where Instagram and YouTube have been shaping narrative expectations since she was nine or 10 years of age. She has watched Bollywood films where the female lead is frequently a function of the hero's story, and she has

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Théodore Chassériau's *Othello and Desdemona in Venice* (1850), oil on canvas



John William Waterhouse's *Miranda* (1916), oil on canvas



John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* (1851-2), oil on canvas



Robert Braithwaite Martineau's *Katherine and Petruchio* (1855), oil on canvas

grown up in a country where, despite enormous and real gains, women in public life still face routine diminishment — in politics, in newsrooms, in courtrooms, in startups, everywhere. And then she meets Portia, who saunters into a courtroom and outwits everyone else. The curriculum journey that most CBSE and ICSE students take through Shakespeare is worth mapping carefully. From *The Merchant of Venice*, students now move to *Julius Caesar*, where Portia — a different Portia, Brutus's Portia — appears in a brief but piercing scene in which she demands that her husband treat her as an equal partner. "I grant I am a woman, but withal / A woman that Lord Brutus took to wife." The line is 16 words long, and it contains an entire argument about the politics of domestic trust. Then comes *Macbeth* in the final years of high school, wherein Lady Macbeth arrives like a resounding thunderclap, powerful enough to make her husband seem like a mewling kitten in comparison. This is, whether by design or accident, a

remarkable feminist curriculum arc. The student begins with a woman winning over society via her socio-political knowledge and intellect. She moves to a woman demanding to be included in her husband's political and domestic life, not a privilege but as a right. She ultimately arrives at a woman who reaches for power directly and is eventually destroyed by it — destroyed in a way that raises more questions than answers.

THE TEACHER IN THE CLASSROOM

Shakespeare's commitment to female centrality is systemic. It runs across his body of work, and this consistency is especially striking because it spans genres. The Bard's comedies have given us brilliant, witty women who drive romantic plots. His tragedies have shown us women of enormous moral and psychological depth, and his histories, the most male-dominated of his forms, have given us voices like Constance in *King John* or the French Princess

Katherine in *Henry V*; women who, in very little stage time, establish themselves as more than furniture. Even his late romances, sometimes dismissed as lesser work, give us Marina in *Pericles*, Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*, and Miranda in *The Tempest* — young women who embody virtue without being passive, and goodness without being bland.

In a classroom that wants its students to take its Shakespeare seriously, a text does not teach itself. *The Merchant of Venice* court scene can be taught in a way that makes Portia purely instrumental — a plot device that resolves Antonio's problem — or it can be taught in a way that asks students to sit with what the lady actually does and how she does it. The difference between those two methods is, in fact, enormous. In the first, students take away a story about a merchant and a moneylender, and in the second, they take away a question: What does it look like when someone who has been systematically underestimated walks into a room and takes it apart without anyone

even truly realising what's going on? Do we know anyone like that? Could we be like that? Urban Indian English teachers — and particularly the women among them, who are a significant majority at the school level — are in a unique position here. Many of them came through a similar curriculum, many met the women of Shakespeare when they were teenagers themselves. Some of them remember what that feeling, that experience, was like. They all know that what they are teaching is not simply comprehension of a 400-year-old text. Instead, it is a way of seeing, understanding, respecting gender that the students' other cultural inputs probably do not always provide reliable pathways for.

WHY APRIL 23 SHOULD MEAN SOMETHING IN PARTICULAR THIS YEAR

Shakespeare turns 462 on April 23; or rather, the date we have agreed to call his birthday recurs for the 462nd time. India in 2026 is a country that still has to address several urgent and unresolved conversations about women in public life: about safety, about representation, about the gap between Constitutional promise and lived reality. Ours is a country in which a Supreme Court judgment about women's rights blatantly coexists with routine violence against women on a daily basis. Ours is also a country in which a young girl will, statistically, receive less encouragement than her brother to pursue a career, and nonetheless frequently outperform him in examinations.

This girl will possibly open a textbook this year and read about Portia, about Rosalind, about Gertrude, about Hermione. She will, if she has a good teacher, understand that these women are the core of the argument itself; that one, all-encompassing argument that makes plain that intelligence and eloquence are not gendered, and that the ability to command a story by sheer quality of thought is not something that belongs to men alone. This is an argument that is more than four centuries old. It is also, in the India of 2026, still revolutionary.

A 13-year-old in an urban Indian classroom does not need to know about the Elizabethan theatre's restrictions on women, or the history of feminist literary criticism, or the debate about whether Shakespeare was a proto-feminist or simply a commercially savvy playwright who knew that strong female characters drew audiences. She just needs to see it happen. She needs to see that the text — this old, difficult, archaic text that her teacher has given her — believes, because its author believed, that this way of doing things is but natural, and she needs to understand what that means. Most importantly, she needs to be aware that this way of existence, too, is, and should always be, possible. The rest is just footnotes.

— Subhalakshmi Dey