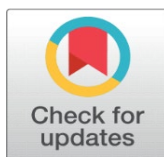


# GENDER POLITICS AND PROTO-FEMINIST DIMENSIONS OF GENDER ROLES IN RENAISSANCE ENGLAND: A SOCIO-LITERARY EXAMINATION

Kristina Kostova <sup>1</sup>  

<sup>1</sup> Department of English Language and Literature University “Goce Delcev” Shtip, North Macedonia, India



**Received** 05 May 2025  
**Accepted** 08 June 2025  
**Published** 15 July 2025

## Corresponding Author

Kristina Kostova,  
[kristina.kostova@ugd.edu.mk](mailto:kristina.kostova@ugd.edu.mk)

**DOI**  
[10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i6.2025.6236](https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i6.2025.6236)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Copyright:** © 2025 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the socio-political and cultural positioning of women in Renaissance England, with a particular emphasis on proto-feminist expression in literature and historical discourse. Drawing from legal treatises, moral writings, religious texts, and theatrical works—particularly those of William Shakespeare—it examines how women’s voices were both suppressed by and embedded within patriarchal structures. The study discusses the ways in which female agency was restricted through marriage contracts, property laws, and gendered expectations, yet also highlights how certain women, such as Queen Elizabeth I and aristocratic patrons, navigated and occasionally subverted these constraints. These figures serve as historical precedents for gender consciousness in a society otherwise dominated by male authority. The paper further analyzes the portrayal of female characters in Renaissance drama and identifies their role in echoing or resisting dominant ideologies. Although not formally feminist, the literature and sociopolitical conditions of the time reveal early critiques of gender inequality and lay the groundwork for the emergence of feminist theory in later centuries. By bringing together historical context and literary analysis, the study illustrates how proto-feminist themes evolved within a culture that was often overtly misogynistic but not devoid of resistance or reformative thought.

**Keywords:** Renaissance England, Gender Politics, Proto-Feminism, Shakespeare, Queen Elizabeth I, Women’s Roles, Patriarchy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The English Renaissance was a period of significant cultural and intellectual transformation, yet gender roles remained deeply entrenched in patriarchal norms. Women were predominantly confined to the private sphere, with their identities and autonomy largely defined through their relationships with men—fathers, husbands, and in rare cases, sovereigns. The only prospect and "profession" for a woman was married life. Women had an illusory freedom of speech, which was shaped and controlled by men. They had illusive financial independence, limited and conditioned by male authority. Historical records, legal treatises, religious doctrine,

and moral literature of the period all reinforce the systemic subordination of women. Scholars such as B.J. Sokol, Bruce Young, and Anthony Fletcher have documented the social, legal, and cultural limitations imposed on women during this time, offering insight into a society that afforded women only illusory freedoms. The position of women in Renaissance England was mostly fixed, however there were certain differences nuanced by class. Another important factor in the slight changes of women's position in society was the defiance of Queen Elizabeth I against the oppressive patriarchy which can be seen as a historical precedent that influenced the overall state of mind. While aristocratic women could wield economic influence, even they remained tethered to domestic expectations and gendered hierarchies. However, certain literary and political figures—most notably Queen Elizabeth I—began to subtly challenge these norms, inspiring what may be termed proto-feminist discourse within literature and public life. This paper examines the historical reality of women's positions in Renaissance England, tracing early forms of feminist consciousness in literature and cultural expression, particularly within the works of William Shakespeare.

## 2. METHOD

This qualitative, literature-based study employs a historical-critical method to examine primary and secondary texts from the English Renaissance. Primary sources include moral treatises, legal documents, and religious texts such as *The Monument of Matrones*, Henry Swinburne's *Treatise of Spousals*, Robert Cleaver's *A Godly Forme of Household Government*, and the political oratory of Queen Elizabeth I. Secondary sources provide historical context and feminist interpretations, including works by scholars such as Juliet Dusinberre, Phyllis Rackin, and Anthony Fletcher. The study also references literary works by William Shakespeare and his contemporaries, focusing on how proto-feminist themes are woven into theatrical discourse. The method involves textual analysis, supported by historical contextualization, to explore the shifting representations and realities of women's roles during the period in question.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of primary and secondary sources reveals a deeply embedded patriarchal structure within Renaissance England, where women were legally, economically, and socially dependent on male authority. The dominant discourse emphasized the role of women as obedient wives and silent moral guardians of the household. Family life was especially important and patriarchal. The man was the head of the family and the sole bearer of authority. Children were brought up to show respect for their parents, especially their father. The father's power and authority were recognized as part of the social order. The father was considered to have the right to arrange marriage for his daughters. The view was accepted that there should be consent from both parties to a marriage, even when it came to a contract marriage [Sokol and Sokol \(2003\)](#), but this was not always respected. The voice of women was usually not heard within the family. According to Henry Swinburne's *Treatise of Spousals or Matrimonial Contracts*, written circa 1600, consent to marry was legally understood to be an inward state, constituted by a sober and well-considered intention.

Another popular marriage treatise was written by Robert Cleaver and published in 1603, *A In Godly Forme of Hovsehold Government* Cleaver

---

demonstrates the patriarchal power structure and the necessity for gendered hierarchy, advocating:

“if she not be subiect to her husband, to let him rule all household, especially outward affaires: if she will make head against him, and seeke to haue her owne waies, there will be doing and undoing. Things will goe backwarde, the house will come to ruine.” (Cleaver, *A Godly Forme of Household Government*, Retrieved from the digital collection *Early English Books Online*).

In a lot of moral treatises which were published during the Renaissance, it was asserted that ‘by her speech, the wife disrupts household harmony, by her unchastity she subverts patrilineal inheritance, and by her disobedience she destroys right rule and order in her little state’ [Vaughan \(1994\)](#).

As far as the position and expectations for women who were parts of different social strata are concerned, in the time of Shakespeare and the other playwrights of his day, inequalities between men and women were implicit. There can be no denying that there is much evidence of a history of misogyny and female oppression at the time. In fact, significantly fewer historical records have been recorded for women than for men, which is a confirmation of the prevalence of the androcentric voice in Renaissance England culture. At that time, openly oppressive and misogynistic themes were very popular, and the stories they told were considered to be historically accurate expressions of beliefs that were generally accepted. In Renaissance England, women had very few rights. Numerous religious, economic, and political factors created a wide divide between public and private life and contributed to increased domestication of women and the restriction of their economic scope [Rackin \(2005\)](#). Women had no legal independence and rarely had a social identity other than that of their father or husband [Plain and Sellers \(Eds.\) \(2007\)](#).

The editor of *The Cultural Identity of Seventeenth-Century Woman* points out that the woman's place was inside the house, her work was strictly housekeeping. Women embraced this separation between the private and public spheres and largely shared the dislike for the idea of female involvement in politics, which was universally accepted in the age in which they lived. Anthony Fletcher in *Gender, Sex, and Subordination in England 1500-1800* writes that it was common to assume that men and women had clearly defined gender roles in the private and public spheres. Femininity was presented as nothing more than a set of negatives. Women not only had to be virgins, but they also had to be seen as virgins: silence, humility and modesty were the hallmarks of a virgin and honest woman.

With certain exceptions, most women who lived during the English Renaissance could not own property, attend university, or defend their rights in court. The majority lived under the governance of their husbands, fathers, and, in the case of women who entered convents, the church [Robin et al. \(2007\)](#) *Encyclopaedia* 298). The most common "craft" for women was that of being a housewife and maintaining married life. Marriage and fertility were considered a woman's natural destiny: without them she would be considered unfulfilled, bitter, and would die like a spinster. The choice of a spouse was not for the sake of fulfilling romantic desires, feelings or affections, but was primarily the basis for establishing an economically viable household. At the time of marriage, everything that belonged to the wife usually passed into the hands of the husband, unless otherwise stated in settlements agreed upon by legal entities. Marriage was considered valid if it was concluded in front of two other witnesses, so that each party had the right to prevent the other from marrying a third party. Domestic violence was not sanctioned. In fact, wife beating was considered a perfectly acceptable means of resolving domestic

disputes. The law considered a married woman to be a *feme covert*, a term meaning that a married woman has a legal-bureaucratic identity attached to and enveloped by that of her husband and whose property was under his control, unless otherwise resolved upon marriage. Lower-class women entered the labour market, especially in trade, but always under the supervision of their fathers, brothers or husbands. Their primary role was that of housewife, on whose shoulders all household chores fell. Women were excluded from universities and taught professions [Rackin \(2005\)](#).

There were treatises and other written pieces which proliferated in misogyny. For instance, a popular early-sixteenth book by Juan Luis Vives *On the Education of the Christian Woman* (published originally in 1523; translated from the Latin by Richard Hyrde in 1540) strongly recommended a distinct educational program for women which would be appropriate for their ostensible inferiority and their sole purpose in life—chastity (Beauchamp xlix).

In general, male superiority was generally accepted, but not every woman was subordinated in every way to every man. On the contrary, many women held positions of authority and power that would be considered exceptional even today. The gender hierarchy coexisted with a hierarchy of status and rank.

Aristocratic women owned large estates and had economic power that in today's conditions can be compared to that of the manager of a large modern corporation. Because of their status and wealth, women from the aristocracy were released from doing household chores, however they were still trapped in the private sphere of their households. The education of the women from the upper class was limited and only in function of decor and minimal training to be smart enough companions to their future husbands. The daughters of aristocrats entered arranged marriages, and before that happened, they were "ranked" mostly in terms of their dowry. Getting married to them was a kind of trophy for their husband.

Although in a quite unenviable social position, with their very presence in the audience of theatrical performances, women were a target group to which the dramatic messages were sent. As clients who paid for tickets to see the performances, women not only contributed to its maintenance, but also possessed a collective economic power that guaranteed that no play would be successful if it did not meet the expectations of women in the audience. In the absence of complete historical records, the literary texts of the plays can be considered as a solid confirmation of the desires and interests which women brought with them when they went to the playhouses. Women who were part of the London audience had their own views [Rackin \(2005\)](#).

It was in the interest of the playing companies for their performances to be popular, visited and to arouse interest and sympathy in the audience. Hence, the presence of women from different social strata in the audience makes the forms of subversion against the patriarchal norms in the dramatic texts largely lucrative.

Although women held a constant secondary position in society, it may be argued that during the English Renaissance there were certain instances of developments of notions regarding women equality and female empowerment. Since the English Renaissance occurred several centuries before the advent of feminism, one might only talk of proto-feminism. Proto-feminism is a term which refers to the earliest manifestations of what is today called feminist thought and occurred centuries before feminism emerged as a social movement and literary-theoretical and critical thought [Koshka \(2007\)](#).

However, there were also male writers who wrote defences of women. Such is the case with Sir Thomas Elyot's *Defence of Good Women* (1540) and Heinrich

---

Cornelius Agrippa's *Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex*. Elyot and Agrippa disputed and rejected Juan Luis Vives' misogynistic points. Not only did Elyot speak of women and men as physical and intellectual equals, but he also gave approval to the notion that a wife has the right to refuse to conform to her husband's wishes in order to aim for a higher goal – morality. Elyot also indicated Christine de Pizan's Zenobia of Palmyra as the epitome of the ideal female ruler. [Jordan \(1990\)](#).

Agrippa in *Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex* (1529; translated from the Latin into English by David Clapam 1542) maintained that women and men were only different in “the location of the parts of the body for which procreation required diversity” (Rabil 43). Not only did Agrippa advocate for complete economic and political freedom for women, he also represented both marriage and the convent as forms of state-sanctioned confinement, for “when [a woman] has reached the age of puberty, she is delivered over to the jealous power of a husband, or she is enclosed forever in a workhouse for religious” [Rabil \(1996, 95\)](#); [Jordan \(1990\)](#).

Not only were these proto-feminist ideas present in treatises and books, but also in the literary texts of theatrical plays, especially in those written by Shakespeare, which abound in fierce and memorable female characters who send out important messages regarding the social standing of women. It was quite important for playwrights to reach the significant half of their audience which was comprised of women. A successful play would be one which would be accepted and loved by women, not only by men. It was in the playwrights' interest to focus on women's views, attitudes and interests. Playwrights often expressed proto-feminist ideas, albeit mostly subtly and occasionally.

In Renaissance England, women were present in public life, but despite this, the variety of their roles in life and in the plot of the plays often went unnoticed. But even in a situation of mass marginalization of women, there were women who stood out and defied the oppressive patriarchal system. For an array of reasons during the English Renaissance there was a number of aristocracy women who were able to acquire personal and political power, usually through their positions as daughters, wives, or mothers. Such women occupied thrones throughout Europe, including countries with strong central governments such as England, France, Scotland, Italy and Spain. To gain and hold onto political power, many women assumed roles which were deemed unconventional for most females of that time: giving orders to men, analysing international relations, forging diplomatic alliances, and cultivating a strong public persona. [Robin et al. \(2007\)](#).

These women were rare exceptions, but they influenced the direction of public discourse towards more liberal views on the role of women in the private and public spheres. The most obvious evidence of female influence on the theatre is the fact that many London playing companies had women as patrons [Rackin \(2005\)](#). With their support for the development of the theatrical activity, these women had the power to influence the politics of the playing company they sponsored in the same way male patrons influenced the playing companies they sponsored.

It is of particular interest to consider the influence that Queen Elizabeth I had on the perception of women as social agents. Political leadership is another example of how the status hierarchy complicated the position of men and women in a way that it is difficult to understand in today's world. Experts claim that Queen Elizabeth I faced difficulties as a woman with authority over men. Evidence is highlighted that seems to indicate that her male subjects experienced anxiety and difficulties similar to those experienced by scholars during the modern female movement. But the

glorious speech Elizabeth I gave to the English troops at Tilbury on 9 August 1588, before leaving for the battle against the Spanish Armada, depicts how she dealt with the challenges. As Koshka-Hot writes in *English Drama*, this speech is a confirmation of the manipulation of the dichotomy of the monarch's male/female and political/natural body. In her speech, she flatters the men present, practicing rhetoric which is acceptable to them, but intelligently and diplomatically surpasses them, inserting the distinction between the concepts of sex and gender, thus saying that she belongs to both women and men: "I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too" [Koshka et al. \(2010\)](#).

Elizabeth I affirms herself as a ruler with a natural and political body whose indivisibility is not questioned. For today's conditions, it is debatable how successful such a tactic would be and how much it would serve the benefit of female emancipation. But in a society that was openly misogynistic, this positioning of hers is an endeavour by which she affirms her dominance and thus creates new opportunities and inspiration for women. Elizabeth I as a ruler enjoyed the support of many of her subjects. Plenty of defences were written for her, but the most famous one is Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queen*, which was in favour of women's capacity to rule. In it, Spenser depicts his queen as one distinguished by her chastity, femininity, and her difference from males [Benson \(1992\)](#).

Elizabeth I was an absolutist monarch, and her personal qualities reflected the overall state of mind of the time. Optimism and energy dominated during her reign. The recorded silent actions of Elizabeth I testify to her willingness to impose greater tolerance and inclusiveness for women. In the plays written during and after her reign, one can point to a plethora of female characters who demonstrate strong will, independence and disobedience, personal qualities of Elizabeth I that have spilled over into the public discourse. As Juliet Dusinberre writes in *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, precisely the period during and immediately after her reign, i.e. between 1590 and 1625, is characterized by a feminist spirit.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The English Renaissance was a period of vibrant cultural development framed by strict gender hierarchies and patriarchal institutions. While women's legal and social standing remained subordinate, their presence—both as subjects of discourse and active participants in cultural life—was far from passive. The era produced a complex array of literary and political expressions that, despite the prevailing misogyny, offered glimpses of proto-feminist thought. Through moral treatises, legal frameworks, and especially theatrical works, early resistance to the ideology of female inferiority began to emerge. Figures like Queen Elizabeth I and progressive thinkers such as Elyot and Agrippa challenged dominant norms, carving space for women's voices in the public and intellectual sphere. These shifts, though limited in immediate structural change, represent foundational efforts in the long trajectory toward gender equality. The nuanced representation of female agency in Shakespeare's plays and the evolving discourse surrounding women's roles suggest that the Renaissance, while not feminist by name, was rich in the seeds of feminist thought.

#### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

---

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

## REFERENCES

- Agrippa, H. C. (1996). *Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex* (A. Rabil Jr., Trans. & Ed.). University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226010601.001.0001>
- Benson, P. J. (1992). *The invention of Renaissance woman: The Challenge of Female Independence in the Literature and Thought of Italy and England*. Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Dusinberre, J. (1975). *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*. Macmillan.
- Fletcher, A. (1995). *Gender, sex, and Subordination in England 1500-1800*. Yale University Press.
- Ford, B. (Ed.). (1982). *The Age of Shakespeare (Vol. 2)*. Penguin Books.
- Jordan, C. (1990). *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models*. Cornell University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501721847>
- Koshka-Hot, R. (2007). *English Drama: Renaissance, Modernity, Feminist Theory*. BIGOSS.
- Koshka-Hot, R., Srbinovska, S., & Bojadzievska, M. (2010). *Feminism and Gender: A lexicon*. Sigmapres.
- Plain, G., & Sellers, S. (Eds.). (2007). *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139167314>
- Rackin, P. (2005). *Shakespeare and Women*. Oxford University Press.
- Robin, D. M., Larsen, A. R., & Levin, C. (Eds.). (2007). *Encyclopedia of Women in the Renaissance: Italy, France, and England*. ABC-CLIO. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9798216037415>
- Sokol, B. J., & Sokol, M. (2003). *Shakespeare, law, and Marriage*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511484001>
- Vaughan, V. M. (1994). *Othello: A Contextual History*. Cambridge University Press.
- Vives, J. L. (2002). *The Instruction of a Christen Woman* (W. Beauchamp, V. Hageman, & E. H. Mikesell, Eds.). University of Illinois Press. (Original work published 1540)
- Young, B. W. (2008). *Family Life in the Age of Shakespeare*. Greenwood Press. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9798400649868>