What Was Life Like for Women During Shakespeare’s Time? (1564-1616)

**Source A:** Things changed, however, as teenagers approached marrying age; freedoms were curbed. Upper-class children in particular found their parents suddenly taking a lot more interest in their romantic affairs. Even though it was no longer fashionable for parents to arrange and force a marriage against a child's will, as Juliet's father tries to do, the child still wasn't entirely in control of his or her marital fate. As parents explained over and over, the property gains and family alliances that a good marriage could bring were just too important to be left in the hands of children. The Margaret Dakins’ story showed the lengths parents could go to in their quest for a good match: because she was the only child of a wealthy couple, the future status of the family depended on her marriage, and her parents looked long and hard to find just the right combination of property and prestige. But evidently they were better judges of wealth than health, for both of her first two husbands died within a few years of marriage, and by the age of twenty-five, she was on her third husband!

"The Ties that Bind: Family Life," in Shakespeare Alive!, Bantam, 1988, pp. 85-102.

**Source B:** During the time of William Shakespeare, the majority of women had very limited rights in England. Despite the fact that England was ruled by a female monarch for over four decades, most women had little power over the direction of their lives. Most writings about the life of the family during this time in history centered around the traditional partriarchal paradigm--that of "domination and submission." Just as the kingdom was ruled by a monarch, the father and head of the household ruled over his wife and children. Women were denied formal educations, the opportunity to hold office, and also guarded against speaking out too freely in fear of being labeled as a "scold." Such women were considered a threat to the public, and were corrected with such punishments as public humiliation and abuse. Although women did endure such limits on their political and social rights, they did have extended to them greater econimic freedom. Single women were able to "inherit land, make a will, sign a contract, possess property . . . without a male guardian . . ."(10). Unfortunately, such rights dissolved with marriage. History shows as well that many daughters were heirs to a father's property, if there were no male heir, despite the tradition of [the firstborn child inheriting the family estate]. Wives as well could find themselves in charge of a large estate after the death of a husband, until an eldest son was old enough to do so.

The following entries are (unless otherwise noted) summaries (by various hands in English 345.01 Shakespeare Fall 1997) of sections in Stephen Greenblatt's "General Introduction" (1-76) to The Norton Shakespeare (Norton, 1997).

**Source C:**  Elizabethan Women from the lower classes were also expected to obey the male members of their families without question. Lower class Elizabethan women would not have attended school or received any formal type of education. Elizabethan women would have had to learn how to govern a household and become skilled in all housewifely duties. Their education would have been purely of the domestic nature in preparation for the only real career option for a girl - marriage! Single Elizabethan women were sometimes looked upon with suspicion. It was often the single women who were thought to be witches by their neighbours. All Elizabethan women would be expected to marry, and would be dependant on her male relatives throughout her life.

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|  | * Elizabethan women were tutored at home - there were no schools for girls * Elizabethan women were not allowed to enter University * Elizabethan women could not be heirs to their father's titles ( except female royals) * Elizabethan women could not become Doctors or Lawyers * Elizabethan women did not have the vote and were not allowed to enter politics * There were no Elizabethan women in the Army or Navy * Elizabethan women were not allowed to act in the theatres ( but women at court *were* allowed to perform * in the [Masques](http://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/elizabethan-masques.htm))   <http://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/elizabethan-women.htm>  **Writing Assignment: Write a well-developed paragraph comparing what it would have been like to be a**  **woman during the Elizabethan Age compared to now. You must use at least three quotes in your**  **response. Make sure that all of your sources are cited and that you introduce your quotes.**  **OUTLINE:**  **Topic sentence: Mention about how life was much different for women during Shakespeare’s time.**  **EVIDENCE: Quote from sources (Source A, B, or C)**  **COMMENTARY: Explain how it is different now**  **EVIDENCE: Quote from source (Source A, B, or C)**  **COMMENTARY: Explain how it is different now**  **EVIDENCE: Quote from source (Source A, B, or C)**  **COMMENTARY: Explain how it is different now**  **CONCLUDING SENTENCE: Would it have been easier or harder to live back then?** |
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