



Women of Will: Following the Feminine in Shakespeare's Plays

By Tina Packer

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From one of the country's foremost experts on Shakespeare and theatre arts, actor, director, and master teacher Tina Packer offers an exploration—fierce, funny, fearless—of the women of Shakespeare's plays. A profound, and profoundly illuminating, book that gives us the playwright's changing understanding of the feminine and reveals some of his deepest insights. Packer, with expert grasp and perception, constructs a radically different understanding of power, sexuality, and redemption.

Beginning with the early comedies (*The Taming of the Shrew*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Comedy of Errors*), Packer shows that Shakespeare wrote the women of these plays as shrews to be tamed or as sweet little things with no definable independent thought, virgins on the pedestal. The women of the histories (the three parts of *Henry VI*; *Richard III*) are, Packer shows, much more interesting, beginning with Joan of Arc, possibly the first woman character Shakespeare ever created. In her opening scene, she's wonderfully alive—a virgin, true, sent from heaven, a country girl going to lead men bravely into battle, the kind of girl Shakespeare could have known and loved in Stratford. Her independent resolution collapses within a few scenes, as Shakespeare himself suddenly turns against her, and she yields to the common caricature of his culture and becomes Joan the Enemy, the Warrior Woman, the witch; a woman to be feared and destroyed . . .

As Packer turns her attention to the extraordinary Juliet, the author perceives a large shift. Suddenly Shakespeare's women have depth of character, motivation, understanding of life more than equal to that of the men; once Juliet has led the way, the plays are never the same again. As Shakespeare ceases to write about women as predictable caricatures and starts writing them from the inside, embodying their voices, his women become as dimensional, spirited, spiritual, active, and sexual as any of his male characters. Juliet is just as passionately in love as Romeo—risking everything, initiating marriage, getting into bed, fighting courageously when her parents threaten to disown her—and just as brave in facing death when she discovers Romeo is dead. And, wondering if Shakespeare himself fell in love (Packer considers with whom, and what she may have been

like), the author observes that from Juliet on, Shakespeare writes the women as if he were a woman, giving them desires, needs, ambition, insight.

Women of Will follows Shakespeare's development as a human being, from youth to enlightened maturity, exploring the spiritual journey he undertook. Packer shows that Shakespeare's imagination, mirrored and revealed in his female characters, develops and deepens until finally the women, his creative knowledge, and a sense of a larger spiritual good come together in the late plays, making clear that when women and men are equal in status and sexual passion, they can—and do—change the world.

Part master class, part brilliant analysis—*Women of Will* is all inspiring discovery.



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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for Tina Packer's **WOMEN OF WILL**

“At once humanistic and grounded in the historical context of Elizabethan England . . . astute.”

-Elizabeth Toohey, *Christian Science Monitor*

“Fierce and witty.”

-Broadway World

“This work by the founding artistic director of the celebrated Shakespeare & Company in Lenox, MA, is everything lovers of the Bard would want . . . Don’t miss!”

-Barbara’s Picks, *Library Journal*

“Fascinating . . . detailed . . . Her experience in the theater gives her book a hands-on dimension . . . her knowledgeable tracing of connections among the plays and parallels among characters is never less than compelling.”

-Michiko Kakutani, *New York Times*

“Packer recognizes in Shakespeare’s full dramatic trajectory a great artist gaining an ever fuller understanding of both genders’ human identity . . . An important and fascinating addition to feminist literary criticism.”

-Bryce Christensen, *Booklist* (Starred Review)

“You have given me a sublime, healing gift . . . Rarely, if ever, in untold years of my own Shakespeare studies have I experienced a work that leaps from the page into my mind, heart, body, and soul with such luminous, revelatory vibrancy as your ruminations and revelations . . . To read your narrative of each play, to ponder the trajectory of Shakespeare’s evolution in his understanding and portrayal of women, to enter into the tangled, interconnected historical and biographical connections and contexts of Shakespeare life with such precision and aliveness, and to surrender to the immense questions that matter most to us, of power, institutional and cultural structures, the realities of women in every era, the treasure of language, and the mysteries and powers of creativity itself, gave me illumination and pleasure and hope beyond what I can express here.”

-Martha Andersen

“A joy to read. The language is conversational - an easy tone that belies the depth to which Tina Packer is able to reach into the plays to unveil the evolution of Shakespeare’s awareness of the power inherent in ‘the

feminine' . . . This consummate lover of all things Shakespeare delivers a dazzling new message about Shakespeare's capacity to learn and grow from observations and interactions with women, and transmute these into characters that become more complex, more true, more powerful. *Women of Will* is destined to become one of the best-loved books about Shakespeare, never to be filed into the bookcase, always accessible in case of need."

-Tamar March, Founder, Arden Seminars, Inc.

"Visceral and intellectual . . . A sparkling, insightful exploration of Shakespeare's words and world."

-*Kirkus*

About the Author

TINA PACKER is the founding artistic director of Shakespeare & Company in Lenox, Massachusetts. She has directed most of Shakespeare's plays, acted in seven, and taught the entire canon at multiple colleges and universities, among them Harvard, MIT, and Columbia. Packer was an Associate Artist with the Royal Shakespeare Company in England, and worked at the Royal Court and Aldwych theatres in London, Leicester, Glasgow, Edinburgh, and other regional theatres, as well as for BBC and ITV television. The performance piece *Women of Will* has traveled across America as well as internationally. She lives in Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

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Prologue

Somewhere in the midst of my forty years of directing Shakespeare's plays, acting in quite a few of them (never at the same time—directing and acting occupy different parts of the brain, and I find it impossible to be in both states at once), somewhere in the midst of this I realized that the Shakespeare who wrote *The Taming of the Shrew* was not the same Shakespeare who wrote *The Tempest*; that the Shakespeare of *Henry IV Part 1* was very different from the Shakespeare of *Coriolanus*; and where a principal difference lay was in Shakespeare's relationship to his women. The callow youth who penned *Shrew* undertook a long, arduous, always-seeking journey to become the playwright who wrote *The Winter's Tale*.

The development in Shakespeare's relationship to women was always there in front of me, hidden in plain sight. I wasn't looking for a pattern to emerge; it came of its own accord. It came because I had done so many of the plays over and over again as actor, director, teacher, and writer. It came because I am a woman, and the women's parts had always been so alive to me, even one-line servant parts. It came because I often felt antipathy to the women in Shakespeare's early comedies, I was electrified by the women of the middle plays, and I responded gently to the women of the mature plays. It came because a pattern is there, written into the very fabric of all his work, plays and poems. What happens to the women, how Shakespeare thought about them, what he had them do, what they represented to him, and, finally, how he became one of them, is there. It is written on the page, but it lives principally in performance; it is there to be understood, breathing, alive through the minds and hearts of other people now embodying the scenes....

I applied for a Guggenheim so I could take a little time off from running a theatre company full-time and spend some hours in contemplation. Those hours were fifteen years ago—and that year I worked my way through the whole canon in the chronological order in which we think he wrote the plays. I found the title of this book. Or, rather, my husband, Dennis Krausnick, suggested it as we were discussing themes. Following the Feminine in Shakespeare's Plays was my idea. And we merged the two.

Obviously, I was studying the women of Will Shakespeare; I was also understanding their own will to power, the myriad ways they expressed their desires for and fears of power, how they went underground, how they subverted or directly opposed power. Finally, I understood why “will” in Elizabethan English means sexuality or sexual desire, the sexual parts themselves, and how this kind of will played a major part in the actions of the plays, the power or destruction of the women, and why it is, even in this day and age, vitally important that women own their own sexuality on their own terms, that it not be the possession of any other person, culture, or king.

I turned that knowledge first into a performance piece that I could act in myself, then with one other actor; then into five plays; and finally into this book. I see Shakespeare not just as a theatre person who part-owned, acted, and wrote for a company (not unlike my own) but as an artist who underwent a spiritual journey in which the women became vessels for the truth, one way or another.

From that moment of realization, when I watched the crossing of Ariel and Miranda onstage—an event that occurred spontaneously once in rehearsal and then was officially directed by me, enacted by others—my own perspective shifted. In the rehearsal of *The Tempest* I had understood something dimly; I had then put it into practice; now I was watching its execution; and from that progression a much larger meaning emerged. It inspired me. I felt a deep desire to chase that meaning, investigate it, follow it, ask other people to discuss its meaning, start looking at it from multiple points of view, let it drop into my own psyche again and again, and see what came up. A thought emerged; a stage action was born. “Ariel and Miranda, they know each other, they have always known each other, they have lived with the sense of each other’s presence for fifteen years on this island. But it is only in this moment of parting that they acknowledge each other. They’ll never see each other again, but they will always travel with each other, take strength from each other. They are vulnerability and the desire to take on the world. They are the manifestation of Shakespeare’s reason for living.” This began my long journey to discover the truth that lay below the surface of the women in Shakespeare—a path that allowed me to see my own life. Eventually, it became the journey of my acting partner, Nigel Gore, and to some extent of our director, Eric Tucker; it also reflected the journey of our theatre company, Shakespeare & Company, and the two people who have stood with me through its thirty-seven-year progression: Kevin Coleman, director of education, and Dennis Krausnick, director of training.

The story of this book is a simple one. It follows the progression of the women in Shakespeare’s plays. Then, from the way in which Shakespeare wrote about women, we follow his spiritual growth. And I have a hope that understanding the spiritual growth of an artist of Shakespeare’s magnitude may provide a road map for the kind of creative action and understanding we need to alter the dangerous course the world is on—for Shakespeare pulled back from the apocalypse of *Lear*, *Coriolanus*, and *Macbeth* and found a way to the regeneration and rebirth of *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest*.

It’s a huge canvas; but, then, Shakespeare is a huge soul. He’s played in every part of the world, because he reflects back to people their inner state of knowing. There are usually only two to four women in each of the plays—as opposed to ten to twenty men; women are always the minority, always “other” in some way. I counted. Depending on whether you think fairies are male or female, witches are human or nonhuman (Is Hymen a god or a man? Does the goddess Diana exist, or is she a dream? Is Ariel a man or a woman?), there are nearly a thousand men in the canon, to 160 or thereabouts women and girls. And because the women are never assumed to be the apex of political power (except Cleopatra, of course), the women are always looking at power: either how to acquire some or how to avoid its worst violence, how to circumvent it or how to acquiesce to it, but they must watch it all the time. It is not a neutral subject to them. And of course they never just assume it’s theirs to organize and exploit, as many of the men do. This means that women become skilled observers of power. And often the thoughtlessness of power is visited upon the women, so you can see what a society values by its power structures: if women do not have any overt power, their voices will

not be heard, nor what they value in the raising of children, even though they may be the chief caregivers. In these cases, the will to power is very alive to women, because there is no accepted course for them to exert influence. They have to find a way to make an impact on the world of family politics and status. And, ultimately, Shakespeare knew the world would not find proper harmony if the qualities of women and men did not come into balance.

Women have been alive in the minds of writers and actors (until relatively recently, all male, of course) for the two thousand-plus years during which those professions have existed. Women did not get to portray themselves onstage or by pen until 350 years ago, and then only the feisty few who would not be put down. So women as the expression in the unconscious and conscious minds of male artists have been vibrantly alive in the center of most dramatic action; living women rarely had that privilege. This has had several consequences.

Because women are such potent ingredients of men's imaginations, we see how much power men feel women have over them, and how women must be suppressed, defanged, or idealized in one way or another. How, with Eve, they are often thought to be the root of the evil in the world—which says more about the man or men who wrote that story than about Eve herself. Eve is curious and wants knowledge, not power over others. The other consequence affects the women themselves: both onstage and offstage. Women have two levels of understanding concerning how to behave—one, to behave the way men want them to behave and forget that what they want might be different; two, to find out how they really feel and decide whether or not they are going to act on it! It has taken hundreds of years for women's voices to be heard and affect the course of human events. In order for the world to find its healthy balance, all women's voices need to be heard. I do believe artists of depth can portray both sexes—but as far as the history of theatre is concerned, it has been men writing, acting, producing, with women coming late into the game.

Shakespeare broke a mold. After about five years of writing, he saw women as women, including the bind they had been put into. No other playwright, writing before Shakespeare or at the same time as Shakespeare, had ever seen women as women.

You may question whether it is useful to ask why or how Shakespeare was able to do this; that he did it, and that the plays are still spreading their influence, is the most important factor. But the "why" and the "how" do throw light onto the source of Shakespeare's creativity, and are a major perspective of this book.

Shakespeare was an actor. He used the whole of his body, his voice, his spirit, his sexuality, when onstage. So he wrote as an actor—this is viscerally clear, especially once he hit his stride, from Romeo and Juliet onward. His words are embodied words. He was making plays with the whole of his being. What I hope to do in this book is to write as an actor, as a maker of theatre, as a player in the playhouse.

The scholarship around Shakespeare is awe-inspiring. In many ways, the commentary on his plays, taking place in academia in China, Australia, Japan, South America, India, every university in the United States, to say nothing of England and Europe, shows that the desire to understand human nature and decipher great art is palpable in the academy. In fact, the great intellectual tradition to explore the perfectibility of man is alive and well in Shakespeare studies everywhere. But the studier of the play only has one facet of the play to work with—the close reading of the text from an intellectual perspective. The performer of the play wallows in many different textures of psychic mud. And because it is mud, it has a mixture of sounds, smells, touch, unconscious leaps, actions, silences, feelings, that are hard to name. I would not know half the things I know about Shakespeare without my academic brethren; I am forever grateful to them. But it is playing in the playhouse that allows me to go to the depths. I believe Shakespeare's power came from a whole knowing of body, mind, spirit, and sound, developed through his acting. And, if I am honest, I think it's knowing him on

this level that could really make a difference to our understanding of the world. We try to understand others and live in the world with only part of ourselves present. We develop systems where “profit” is narrowly defined. The whole Shakespeare may wallow, wail, and splat—but it is a body of work that informs the whole human being, and awakens dormant perspectives in our interaction with one another as members of the human race. If the way we know life is too narrow, our satisfaction is too narrow, and thus we are always looking mistakenly for satisfaction elsewhere.

I have directed most of the plays in the canon, but have only performed in seven of them—until we came to put the Women of Will cycle onto the stage. In the cycle (five parts, of course, like this book), we perform chunks of twenty-five of the plays, but touch on thirty-seven in all. Therefore, it is Nigel Gore whom you will hear about most often when I talk about my experience of acting the scenes. Both of us are transplanted Brits, went to theatre schools, and had early careers in Britain before coming to America. We met in 2006, when Nigel joined Shakespeare & Company as an actor.

Though I tell the story of Shakespeare’s development through his writing of women, I will also follow tangents, and underpinnings, and subtexts, reporting on responses from many actors I have directed, my fellow actor in the play version of Women of Will, and the director and designers of Women of Will, creating an associative pattern that will, I hope, get closer to the truth of how Shakespeare created those worlds,* where the essence of life could be revealed—and how women’s voices were essential to the revelation.

*Note: Act, scene, and line numbers refer to The RSC Complete Works.

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