

## Elizabethan Women

The Elizabethan era was one of great transition, especially for women. Having a female monarch as well as rapid expanding globalization was increasing women's horizons and placing significantly more value on their decisions. Of course, by today's standards, Elizabethan society's treatment of women was barbaric but, at the time, the advances occurring were monumental. In 1604, a law was passed that allowed men and women to marry without their parent's consent. Still, such marriages were ill advised as the key to the success of a new formed family was their parents' financial backing.

In those times, a negligible number of women were wealthy. Inheritance laws dictated that property be passed to the eldest son. No matter how many daughters a family had, it was the son the inherited, regardless of age; a family could have a 25 year old daughter and an infant son, but it would be the son who inherited the property. However, in case of the total absence of male heirs, it would be the eldest daughter who would inherit (though she could never, under any circumstances, inherit a title). According to these rules, daughters were eligible to inherit around 20%-25% of the time. Despite, in the 17th century, only about 5% of daughters of the elite were inheriting. (Women Waging Law in Elizabethan England, Tim Stretton) The disparity in figures is accounted for because, while women could inherit in some cases, their inheriting was frowned upon and avoided at all costs. For a very clear example of the lengths people went to find male heirs, look no further than King Henry VIII who annulled one marriage (resulting in great civil turmoil) and ended a second with a short sharp shock before finding a wife who could bear him a son, though the doing of it killed her.

On the whole, women's only means were had through the men that provided for them. In childhood and adolescence, a woman was dependent on her father, who protected and financially backed her. When she grew to adulthood, that responsibility would be shifted onto a husband, who took on a similar role financially. Spinsterhood was unheard of; women who didn't get married fell into destitution and were labeled witches. The only viable path for a woman who did not want to get married was to enter the sisterhood of the nuns. A woman's "maidenhood" on her wedding night was considered vitally important. Regardless of the religious implications of premarital sex, having a woman "dishonored" before she joined a man in marriage cast shame upon her and upon her father. As was said earlier, a father's duty towards his daughter was to manage her finances and also to protect her honor. If her honor was "besmirched" before her wedding, her father was the one held responsible and the crime was associated with incest.

Women were not allowed an education as we understand education today. The belief that only boys were admitted into grammar school is myth; some girls were allowed to enter school as early as the mid-1500's, but those girls were not allowed to proceed to university, nor work in professional fields. A woman's proper education consisted in learning to sew, paint, dance, and play musical instruments. Her primary occupation was keeping house and looking and sounding pleasant. Interestingly, however, women were the greatest admirers of books and reading for pleasure. It was considered emasculating for men to read anything other than books on law, medicine, or tithes, so, in the Elizabethan age, upwards of 80% of all books were purchased for and read by women.

Needless to say, the life of a woman in the Elizabethan era was bleak. Religious fanaticism enforced by law molded women into the form of the dutiful wife and mother. Their lives were dull and hard, with successive childbirths making them old before their time and leading to very early deaths. It's for this reason that Shakespeare's depictions of women as brilliant, rebellious, three-dimensional characters is so extraordinary and highly valued.

