

THESIS ABSTRACT

The thesis critically examines the historical and cultural circumstances of women in early modern England and the role of women in Shakespeare's Roman tragedies. In early modern England, men are said to have been participating in the public sphere of the political discourse and women were relegated to the domestic sphere; henceforth, the role of women in Shakespeare's Roman plays tends to be interpreted as supportive because of the plays' dominant political focus. To challenge the prevailing discourse, I consider female characters in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, *Titus Andronicus* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. My thesis argues that even though the Roman plays focus on the political, public sphere which tends to be the domain of men, women mostly actively participate, or express desire to actively participate, in the Roman plays' plots, philosophical contemplations, and political scheming. Cleopatra, Volumnia, Portia, Calpurnia, and Tamora are such characters. Only the less central female characters may embody the passive ideal of a woman confined in the domestic sphere, as exemplified by Lavinia, Virgilia, and Octavia.

The findings show that women were recommended to stay in the domestic sphere, but many of them, especially upper-class ladies, participated actively in the political discourse of their times either directly or indirectly via their male relatives. The feminist scholarship, which has been examining Shakespeare's heroines, underscores the importance of interpreting female characters in their historical and cultural context and emphasises the need not to assume that Shakespeare's heroines are mere representations of victimhood in a misogynistic society, and therefore are to be analysed critically. The Roman plays, unified in their setting, are a unique amalgam of Roman and Elizabethan values, in which female characters realise themselves on the background of two patriarchal societies.