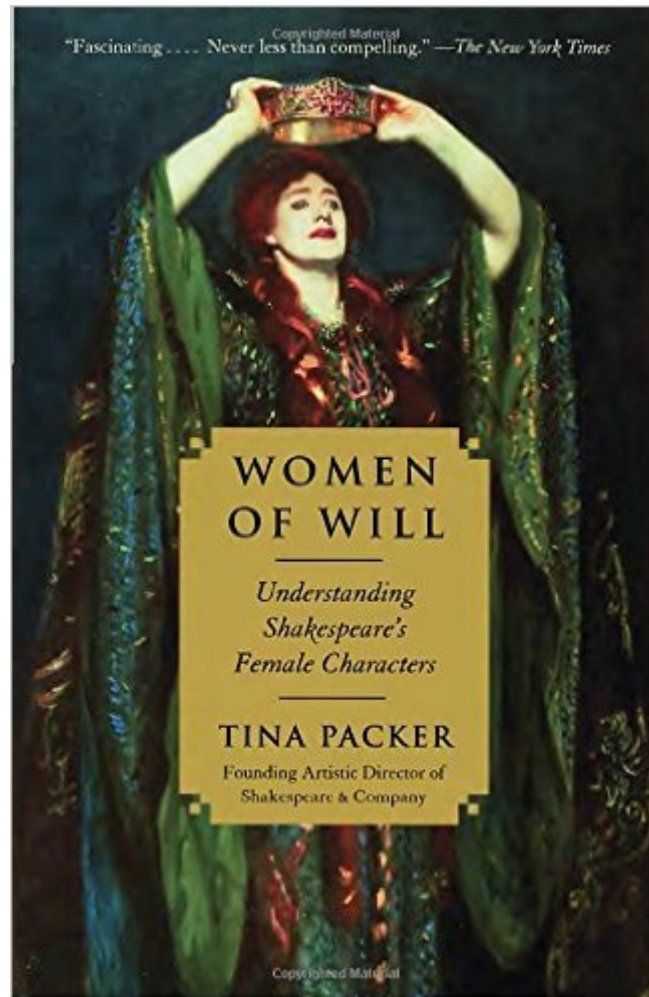


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# Women Of Will: The Remarkable Evolution Of Shakespeare's Female Characters



## Synopsis

Women of Will is a fierce and funny exploration of Shakespeare's understanding of the feminine. Tina Packer, one of our foremost Shakespeare experts, shows that Shakespeare began, in his early comedies, by writing women as shrews to be tamed or as sweet little things with no independence of thought. The women of the history plays are much more interesting, beginning with Joan of Arc. Then, with the extraordinary Juliet, there is a dramatic shift: suddenly Shakespeare's women have depth, motivation, and understanding of life more than equal to that of the men. As Shakespeare ceases to write women as predictable caricatures and starts writing them from the inside, his women become as dimensional, spirited, spiritual, active, and sexual as any of his male characters. Wondering if Shakespeare had fallen in love (Packer considers with whom, and what she may have been like), the author observes that from Juliet on, Shakespeare's characters demonstrate that when women and men are equal in status and passion, they can "and do" change the world.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

When I started reading WOMEN OF WILL, I was intrigued by Tina Packer's concepts of Shakespeare's development in regard to the women in his plays. However, I was soon confused by all the names. Packer describes the roles of the primary characters, especially the women, in about 30 plays, as well as the historical background of most of them, and the key women in Shakespeare's life over time. That means that we readers are introduced to approximately 300

characters in 300 pages. Too much! My impression is that Packer (pack-her) was trying to pack all she knew about Shakespeare and his women into one book – including details related to her primary theories as well as extraneous information that many readers will not be able to absorb. But don't let this giant potpourri (which spreads in every possible direction) dissuade you from reading the book, even if doing so means skipping a few of the plays discussed. Packer's presentation is comprehensive, informative and occasionally deeply meaningful. No, she does not back up all her statements and theories about Shakespeare with scholarly references. She also injects personal experiences and belief, some related to contemporary issues. But in doing so, she helps make Shakespeare relevant to us today. I eventually realized that I had been initially judging her book by academic standards and a traditional "male" approach to writing about literature. Tina Packer is not an academic, although her knowledge about Shakespeare's plays is astounding. She is a Shakespearean actress who has performed the roles of most of the women in these plays. She has also been, for many years, director of a highly regarded Shakespearean theater company in Lenox, Massachusetts.

I didn't really know what to expect with *Women of Will* by Tina Packer. From the name, you could pretty much deduce it would focus on the female characters, especially with a secondary title of *Following the Feminine in Shakespeare's Plays*, which sounds intriguing in theory, but how would it work in practice? After reading the book, I am still trying to figure out how it does work in practice. Much like Will Shakespeare himself, the book is a bit of a mystery, wrapped in a riddle, inside an enigma (to paraphrase Churchill). To begin with the book is not an academic work in that Packer does not spend much time – any time really, citing source documents or such. Her only sources are the plays themselves which she is intimately familiar with from her stage background. In that respect, she really brings to life the characters she focuses on and interprets them in her own way – much like every director or actor has since Will first wrote the plays, but you can't help but come away with the feeling, that it remains just that – her interpretation of these characters – not Shakespeare's. The book itself is broken into five acts that Packer uses to trace her view of the changing way women are portrayed in Shakespeare. Starting with Kate from *Taming of the Shrew*, which shows in her opinion, a sophomoric view of women as property, she traces what she sees as the advancement of his views on the status and value of women through five acts, ending with the stronger, nobler women characters, to be found in Marina (*Pericles*) and Hermoine (*The Winter's Tale*) as she tries to theorize how the idea of the female changed through the writing and what might be the cause of it (*Love Actually*).

Tina Packer is, by many authorities and the humble opinion of this reviewer, THE authority on Shakespeare in the US if not one of the top contenders in the world. Her work on *Women of Will* is remarkable in how it looks at the evolution of the portrayal of women from *Taming of the Shrew* onward (there is a noticeable difference). Her knowledge of the subject is good, almost too good as she writes at the graduate level that will leave most non-academics behind. For literary majors, this will be an excellent read. However, for the rest of, including history majors and the general audience, this book will come up short for a variety of reasons from lacking historical scholarship to moderate self-indulgence. Packer makes a LOT of historical assertions and assumptions in the book, some very interesting, but does not back them up with proper historical contextualization or citation of any kind. If anything, she cites her knowledge on the subject and, while she may be correct, any student of history knows that all facts and analysis must be backed up with citation to assure validity otherwise we're just taking the author's word at it. Pertaining to Packer's moderate case of self-indulgence, she loves to look at herself as an example of how things were and are. While her anecdotes were genuinely amusing as I sincerely laughed at a few, they seemed out of place and took away from the scholarship in the text itself as it became more about the author than the material. If anything, this lends credence to my belief that *Women of Will* suffers from a minor identity crisis as it wants to be scholarly but seemingly autobiographical and conversational at the same time; three things that really cannot coexist in a 300-page book.

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