

Brittney M. Herman
Mentor: Dr. Kristen Deiter
208 Belle Grove Blvd.
Lafayette, LA 70503
817-948-2792
bmalynnh@gmail.com
28 February 2017

Star-Crossed Oppression in a Patriarchal Society: A Feminist Critique of *Romeo and Juliet*

By Brittney M. Herman

Star-Crossed Oppression in a Patriarchal Society: A Feminist Critique of *Romeo and Juliet*

The play *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare is the romanticized tale of star-crossed lovers oppressed into traditional gender roles by their overbearing families and society. This narrative is an incredible love story with laud for its romantic words and loving, though often misguided, gestures. However, what Shakespeare's audience often fails to recognize is the outright oppression of not only women in the play, but men as well due to the expectation to fulfill traditional gender roles. These expectations are typified through every action and again reinforced through sexist language. Although the lovers Romeo and Juliet largely fail to recognize their oppression, the institutionalized sexism that accompanies the gender roles' demand for fulfillment is evident to the feminist critic as a quintessential example of a lack of equality in a patriarchal society. This institutionalized sexism eventually leads to the death of the lovers and their tragedy.

DEMONSTRATIONS OF VERONA AS PATRIARCHAL

Feminist Criticism is interested in the "exploration of the construction of gender and identity" within a text ("Feminist Criticism" 196). In order to fully understand how Romeo and Juliet constructed their gender identities, it is vital to examine the society of Verona. Verona is a patriarchal society, which becomes increasingly evident in the play through not only the words and actions of the major characters, but minor ones as well. Recognizing the oppression caused by Verona's society is essential in understanding a feminist critique of the play.

The characters use sexist language toward men and women, indicating the way the society of *Romeo and Juliet* views how each gender should act. Minor characters are guilty of displaying the sexist views of Verona. Sampson, a Capulet, states, "True; and therefore women, being the weaker vessels, are ever thrust to the wall: therefore I will push Montague's men from

the wall, and thrust his maids to the wall” (Shakespeare 1.1.15-18). In this quotation, misogynist Sampson distinctly calls women weaker than men. Sampson, a minor character, suggests that women are incapable, and that male characters can easily thrust them to the wall. Not only is this a complete dismissal of women’s capabilities, it is also a statement with sexual implications. Being thrust to the wall is a sexual idea, an image frequently used in male-dominant sexual scenes. The woman in this context of sexuality is a passive receiver of the man’s carnal power. A woman is thrust to the wall as a man is in control of the erotic situation.

Thrusting women to the wall can also clarify Sampson’s-and consequently Verona’s-idea that women are not considered as individuals who can take up action. Sampson claims women will be tossed aside. The male character here does not consider the women as threats to his plan against the Montagues. They are not just invalidated as oppositions to his plan, but completely invalidated as even needing any sort of attention or consideration. As far as Sampson is concerned, when he destroys the Montague men the women will simply be thrust to the side, accept that they have been defeated, and stay out of the way. Sampson is not convinced that women could, after being pushed aside, take up any action. He believes they will passively accept their fate, leave the fighting to the men, and as traditional gender roles require, do nothing.

Unfortunately, women are not the only ones subject to sexist statements. He determines he will throw the Montague men from the wall. The men, as their gender role requires, are guards of the wall, expected to take up arms against intruding forces. Sampson also expresses a sort of superiority he feels over the Montague men. He assumes he is superior because of his fighting abilities, deriving his self-worth from the perception of his violent capabilities. The young Capulet man not only buys into the gender roles required of him, but he fails to recognize

the negative effects of this. Further, through the superiority he conveys in this statement, he is exposing himself as under the impression that the Montagues agree a man's value is at least somewhat linked to his capacity for violence. The fact that Sampson assumes this shows how the society was functioning under a patriarchal idea, creating institutionalized, almost required, sexism. This is only one example of how men are oppressed into their gender role. The young men and women of Verona see well-defined gender roles surrounding them and what other families expect of them.

Tension in the air of Verona is nearly tangible as the two most powerful families in the city, the Capulets and Montagues, are constantly at odds with one another. Sometimes this leads to outbreaks of physical violence and deadly feuds. Consequently, men in Verona must chronically live in fear of an inevitable, physical fight. It is a requirement that the men in the families fight for their respective kin. Due to the general expectations Verona holds for their gender men feel "an inward pressure to masculine self-assertion that cannot be appeased or concluded," even through massive violence (Applebaum 252). Once again, the character Sampson displays the sexism of the city when he calls out during a fight in the first scene, "Draw, if you be men..." (Shakespeare 1.1.62). Through this he taunts his opponent, suggesting that the opponent is not fulfilling his role as a man if he chooses not to fight. Verona's patriarchal society threatens men's masculinity if they prefer not to draw their swords against one another.

JULIET'S REFUSAL TO CONFORM

From the beginning of the play the families of the lovers clarify the pressure for gender role fulfillment placed on the young men and women in Verona. One distinct example appears through Capulet's anger over Juliet's refusal to abide by her betrothal Paris. He states,

But, and you will not wed, I'll pardon you.

Graze where you will, you shall not house with me.

And you be not, hang, beg, starve, die in the streets,

For by my soul, I'll ne'er acknowledge thee,

Nor what is mine shall never do thee good. (Shakespeare 3.5.187-94).

Juliet resisting her father's demands for marriage threatens his masculinity. Capulet demands passivity from his daughter. Misogynist Verona's society expects her to take her father's demands without question. Juliet resists this, and Capulet feels he must assert his dominance as a father in a patriarchal society. He claims Juliet will no longer be welcome to all he earns for his family. Capulet would rather his own, beloved daughter starve in the streets than disobey his authority. Unfortunately, he has every legal right to disown her because of the institutionalized sexism in Verona.

Lady Capulet and Juliet discuss the young woman's lack of desire to marry when Juliet's refusal of Paris comes up once more. Through their conversation the institutionalized sexism of the patriarchal society is evident. Lady Capulet enters and asks her daughter, "How stands your disposition to be married?" to which Juliet replies, "It is an honour that I dream not of" (1.3.65-66). Juliet expresses her distaste not only in marriage to Paris, but marriage in general. It is not a desire or goal she holds and especially not an honor she would pursue for the sake of marriage alone. Her mother, surely shocked by her daughter's desire to live outside the status quo of a woman in the patriarchal society, responds saying,

Well think of marriage now; younger than you,

Here in Verona, ladies of esteem,

Are made already mothers: by my count,

I was your mother much upon these years

That you are not a maid... (1.3.69-73).

Lady Capulet not only displays her thoughts on Juliet's lack of inclination toward marriage, but uses other young ladies as examples of how Juliet should feel. Lady Capulet states all women of Juliet's age are considering marriage; all ladies of esteem and respect in Verona want marriage and want to become mothers. Further, marriage is a controlling factor in patriarchal societies and this statement by the mother shows the playgoer the degree to which misogynist Verona controls women through marriage. Lady Capulet clarifies the place for women in the society, as submissive wives and mothers, using herself as an example.

Despite Lady Capulet's opinions, Juliet refuses to conform to marriage, and for good reason. Symbolically, marriage is seen as a union and "loving coitus between man and woman" ("Marriage" 636). Juliet does not love Paris and consequently feels she cannot have the full benefits of marriage's symbolic meaning. She is not interested in marriage because she does not yet feel love; an unimportant factor in the marriages of a patriarchal society. Marriage is the role of women in Verona and Juliet is pressured by her mother to fulfill this gender role. Through this lack of desire to marry for status, the playgoer is made aware that Juliet is not interested in conforming to the patriarchy.

Juliet's parents pressure her too seriously about the betrothal to Paris. She is forced into a seemingly helpless situation as she understands their expectations but cannot fulfill them. Juliet feels she cannot discuss the situation with her parents and fears she will be disowned, especially because of who she chose as her husband. Consequently, Juliet decides that death is the only escape from her gender oppression. If Juliet did not feel this fear she would not have chosen to fake her death, Romeo could not have found her seemingly dead, and both would have survived.

ROMEO'S INABILITY TO CONFORM

Romeo, although exceedingly aware of his expected masculine role, also fails to conform to the gender norms of Verona. One way he displays his inability to conform to these gender roles is by displaying a weaker and more acquiescent spirit than what he knows is the accepted norm. He pines, "Bid a sick man in sadness make his will, / Ah, word ill urged to one that is so ill! / In sadness, cousin, I do love a woman." (1.1.202-04). Romeo blatantly calls himself a sick man. Because he calls himself sick in love, he suggests that as a man he is "not in a sound or healthy state" ("Sick"). Romeo considers his masculinity untenable and threatened by his devotion and love for Rosaline. Romeo does not seem to realize he is being unfair to himself through this wording. One could argue this is Romeo putting himself under pressure; however it is vital to remember this is the society in which he was raised. The only reason Romeo thinks this way is because of Verona's pressure. Critic Richard Levin writes that "opposition...is not between the female and male characters...but between two abstract entities that can conflict "inside" one character or outside..." (Levin 126). The conflict in Romeo is between his feelings of heartbreak and the outside pressure of sexist Verona to act masculine.

Another way it becomes clear that Romeo's masculinity pressure is not self-inflicted is through Mercutio's response to Romeo's pining. Mercutio states, "Alas, poor Romeo! He is already dead, stabbed with a white wench's black eye, shot through the ear with a love song, the very pin of his heart cleft with the blind bow-boy's butt shaft" (2.4.13-16). Essentially, Mercutio is feeling sorry for his friend so enthralled with a woman. Mercutio believes Romeo is as good as dead because Romeo trades a portion of masculinity for love, abandoning the role expected of him. Unfortunately, in fulfilling this masculine role himself, Mercutio will soon meet his end.

Although the aforementioned scenes happen at the beginning of the play, Romeo acts virtually no differently when he is later in love with sweet Juliet. He claims at Mercutio's death,

This gentleman, the prince's near ally,
 My very friend, hath got his mortal hurt
 In my behalf; my reputation stain'd
 With Tybalt's slander,—Tybalt, that an hour
 Hath been my kinsman! O sweet Juliet,
 Thy beauty hath made me effeminate
 And in my temper soften'd valour's steel! (3.1.109-15).

The young lover is admitting he lost a portion of his masculinity because of Juliet. To Romeo, “his radically new identity as Juliet’s husband...has made him responsible...for his friend’s death,” putting the stains of Mercutio’s blood on himself rather than Tybalt, the killer and his new kinsman (Kahn 8). Romeo believes that because he is a husband-and has given up some sovereignty-his masculinity is suspect. This lack of sovereignty leads him to an inability to fulfill the required gender role of defending his family and friends in the feud. Although he eventually kills Tybalt, he initially felt he could not fight Tybalt because they are now cousins, but he also could not abandon Mercutio. Romeo acknowledges the authority Juliet has over him and claims he has failed his friend because of it. The young man blames himself for the death, but only because society taught him to conform to expectations he cannot uphold, torn between families. Romeo is consequently lead to his death because he feels that it is impossible to return to his family after failing to protect them and then leaving them.

Men in Verona do not solve their issues by talking, but rather by duels. Nearly every one of the interactions between families ends in one. Romeo surely understand this and fears the

results of getting the two families together to end the feud. When he tried to stop the feud between Mercutio and Tybalt, his friend died. If the gender roles for the men in Verona were not so narrow minded and focused on violence, Romeo's friend could have been saved, and Romeo's hands would be free of Tybalt's blood. Further, he or Juliet could have facilitated discussion leading to peace between the families without the tragedy of the lovers as the catalyst.

TRAGEDY AS A DIRECT RESULT OF OPPRESSION

As previously mentioned, if the young lovers and their families were not subject to the oppression caused by the society's institutionalized sexism and gender roles, the tragedy would be preventable. Without sexism and gender pressure, open communication between the families and within each individual family would have been possible. However, too many of the characters in the play choose to fulfill their gender roles, force these expectations on others, and unwittingly assist in the downfall of Romeo and Juliet. In panics of improvisational thinking fueled by their desire to escape their oppression, Romeo and Juliet make plans to leave patriarchal Verona to live happily with one another. When both hit bumps in that plan, they are thrown off course, their actions manifest their shame of not fulfilling gender roles, and they choose to take their own lives.

Romeo makes the decision to leave his family and friends for his marriage, completely against the role Verona expects a man to fulfill. This decision is perhaps based on the aforementioned guilt Romeo feels for the death of Mercutio, and the death of cousin-in-law Tybalt. He feels he can no longer fulfill the required role as a man. Ultimately, the young lover decides that defying the patriarchal society, leaving his family, and following love is the best choice. Romeo is torn as he cannot simultaneously fulfill his role as a man in both families, made to choose between the two. Consequently, when he perceives that Juliet is dead, he has nothing

left. As men in Verona tend to protect their pride and reputation, he cannot return successfully to the society and admit his mistakes. Romeo feels men in his own family and others would view him as weak because of the mistakes he made for a woman. Since, as Mercutio points out, Romeo was as good as dead anyway, the young lover chooses to end his life at the perceived death of his young wife.

Although in many ways Juliet defies the patriarchy, she is unwittingly and subconsciously reintroduced to the idea that she must be submissive to a man and that she needs one. Because of this, Juliet is submissive to Romeo in their death. Juliet feels that she is nothing without Romeo, the marriage is her sole purpose. She is compliant to Romeo's choice and displays dependence on him by killing herself also. Additionally, she previously defied her parents, who told her she is unwelcome in their home if not obedient. Juliet has faked her death and cannot simply return to the life she had before, perhaps she even fears the consequences the patriarchal society would demand from a woman so out of line if she does return. With the culmination of these pressures and her grief over Romeo, Juliet chooses to end her life using Romeo's "happy dagger" (Shakespeare 5.3.69).

This dagger, symbolic of a phallus, or "representation of the penis...and the ultimate symbol of power," is what kills Juliet (Bressler 321). This moment of the death for a female character through this male-oriented power symbol is in itself symbolic to the feminist reader of how the patriarchal society causes the young couple's demise. Because this symbol of male-dominant society and power kills Juliet, the playgoer perceives the expression of a patriarchal society taking complete power over the lovers. It is clear that this, with Romeo's death just moments before, is a demonstration of the culmination of the destructive effects that the society had on both males and females. The death of the lovers is the "absolute conclusion of some

positive thing:” the young marriage, which, were it not for the oppression of the lovers, would be a positive thing (“Death” 276). Even though this story ends tragically, the feminist critic can secure comfort in knowing the death of the lovers was true to not only the symbolic meaning of death mentioned above, but to another. “Death is the harbinger of revelation;” and thankfully, both the Capulets and the Montagues eventually recognize their wrongdoings and facilitate hope for change (“Death” 276).

In conclusion, the lovers of *Romeo and Juliet* did not always recognize the oppression surrounding them, but the oppression from the patriarchal society nonetheless precipitates their deaths. This pressure affects not only Romeo and Juliet’s actions leading to the tragedy, but their perception of themselves. The expected gender roles manifested by the patriarchal society through their families and supporting characters clarify what is expected of the lovers and how these expectations are oppressive. Verona’s patriarchal society forces expectations that the two lovers cannot fulfill. When the lovers plan to abandon Verona in favor of dismissing gender roles and eventually fail, they take their own lives. They feel that death is the only way to escape their situation as they cannot return. The deaths are ultimately caused by their gender-specific oppression, directly caused by pressure from their families and the psychological result of being raised in such an environment.

Works Cited

- Applebaum, Robert. "'Standing to the Wall:' The Pressures of Masculinity in *Romeo and Juliet*." *The Shakespeare Association of America, Inc.*, vol. 48, no. 3, Autumn 1997, pp. 251-72. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.tntech.edu/stable/2871016>. Accessed 24 Nov. 2016.
- Bressler, Charles E. *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*. 5th ed., Pearson, 2011.
- Chevalier, Jean and Alain Gheerbrant. *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*. Translated by John Buchanan-Brown, Penguin, 1997.
- "Death." Chevalier and Gheerbrant, pp.276-78.
- "Feminist Criticism." *A Handbook to Literature*. Edited by William Harmon, 12th ed., Pearson, 2012, p.196.
- Kahn, Coppélia. "Coming of Age in Verona." *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1977, pp. 5–22. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3194631. Accessed 24 Nov. 2016.
- Levin, Richard. "Feminist Thematics and Shakespearian Tragedy." *PMLA*, vol. 103, no. 2, Mar. 1988, pp.125-38. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.tntech.edu/stable/462429>. Accessed 24 Nov. 2016.
- "Marriage." Chevalier and Gheerbrant, pp. 636-37.
- Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet. The Riverside Shakespeare*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997, pp. 1101-45.
- "Sick." Definition 1c. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.tntech.edu/view/Entry/179187?rskey=VQIB68&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid22747633>. Accessed 24 Nov. 2016.