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“The Weaker Vessels”: The Perpetuation of Traditional Gender Roles in the Patriarchal Society
of Shakespeare’s *Romeo & Juliet*

Despite strong opposition, feminist literary criticism has survived and grown exponentially since its conception. Though humanity has made many strides in both the developed and developing world, true equality still evades us; this unfortunate fact makes feminism a vital cause and cultural component. Thankfully, there are numerous people dedicated to the preservation of feminist ideals and to the personal, professional, social, and educational advancement of women and other minorities. In the words of scholar Charles E. Bressler, “[f]eminist criticism is a heterogenous grouping of . . . peoples of all walks of life who believe that both women and men are equal” (163). Though united by their belief in universal equality, feminist critics employ a variety of critical strategies and focus on a variety of different subjects.

One popular focus of feminist criticism is “‘feminist critique’ (analysis of the works of male authors, especially in the depiction of women and their relation to female readers)” (“Feminist Criticism”). With a writer as ubiquitous and influential as Shakespeare, it is no wonder that his writing is the subject of so much analysis. *Romeo & Juliet*, with its focus on a heterosexual romantic relationship and its inclusion of a female protagonist, readily lends itself to feminist critique. Traditional gender roles are imposed on both women and men in the play, which causes all the characters to suffer as the oppression of women and the perpetuation of toxic, stereotypical masculinity lead them to emotional pain and often poor decisions.

Even a cursory reading of the play reveals a pattern of misogyny. Among the clearest indications is the play's rhetoric. In the very first scene of the play, sexist diction pervades. Two Capulet servants, Sampson and Gregory, have a sinister conversation about their master's enemies, the Montagues:

SAMPSON: 'Tis 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.

.....

I will show myself a tyrant: when I have fought with the men, I will be civil with the maids; I will cut off their heads.

GREGORY: The heads of the maids?

SAMPSON: Ay, the heads of the maids, or their maidenheads, take it in what sense thou wilt.

GREGORY: They must take it [in] sense that feel it.

SAMPSON: Me they shall feel while I am able to stand, and 'tis known I am a pretty piece of flesh. (1.1.15-26)

In this exchange, Sampson boasts to his companion about his plans to combat their enemies. He wishes not only to fight Montague's men—an example of stereotypical male aggression—but to rape and/or kill his women; he speaks of these heinous acts of violence so casually because both the acts themselves and the attitudes behind them are commonplace in the patriarchal society of Shakespeare's Verona. Because he and his fellow men believe that women are “weaker vessels” than they, Sampson finds no sin or injustice in exploiting their weakness. His quips about raping women until he can no longer maintain an erection and what “a pretty piece of flesh” he is serve

as a form of male posturing. *The Oxford English Dictionary Online* defines “posturing” as either literally or figuratively “posing for effect [. . .], attitudinizing” (“Posturing,” def. *n.* 1). Sampson makes these comments because he knows that they will improve his esteem with Gregory, a male peer; this indicates that men gain social prestige when they exert power over women and other men. This conversation and its implications offer insight into some of the detrimental effects of a patriarchal society.

Perhaps more bloodthirsty than Sampson is Juliet’s cousin, Tybalt. The embodiment of hatred and wrath, he devotes his life to inciting fights with the Montague clan. His brash behavior leads to his death when he pushes Romeo to violence through his murder of Mercutio. By allowing himself to be ruled by anger and impulse, as patriarchal conventions condone, he destroys himself and leaves turmoil (Juliet’s grief, Romeo’s guilt) in the wake.

While Tybalt and Sampson exhibit harmful masculine attitudes and behaviors, Romeo represents a softer, more sensitive male. He is repeatedly berated for lacking the will to fight, making flowery declarations of love, and expressing his emotions. His mother questions his pacifism, when all the other young men in Verona welcome physical and verbal confrontation. Only when Romeo embraces the traditional masculine ideals held by his society does his life begin to unravel. This begins when his grief concerning Mercutio’s murder drives him to kill Tybalt. Afterward, he cries before Friar Lawrence, a male authority figure whose guidance he seeks, and receives ridicule in response:

Hold thy desperate hand!

Art thou a man? Thy form cries out thou art;

Thy tears are womanish, thy wild acts [denote]

The unreasonable fury of a beast. (3.3.108-11)

Romeo is compared to both a woman—a member of the “weaker” sex—and a senseless animal because he cries with sadness and guilt over his murder of his wife’s beloved cousin. As a man, Romeo is discouraged from expressing grief, particularly over the death of a foe. Men are expected to kill without remorse and rejoice in defeating their enemies. Friar Lawrence’s position of authority makes his reprimands all the more devastating, as he may significantly influence Romeo. Like the friar, the play itself teaches a dangerous lesson about being a man: Men may not express their emotions, except those which can be harnessed for violence and domination of other people. Encouraging men to stifle excitement, lovesickness, and sadness while seizing anger and violent impulses leads to pain for individual men as well as their victims both male and female.

Another chief problem in patriarchal societies, the oppression of women, is illustrated through Juliet’s experiences with her parents and Paris. Perhaps the most egregious example is when Capulet and Paris discuss the prospect of giving away Juliet’s hand in marriage with little discussion given to Juliet’s thoughts and feelings. Capulet hesitates initially, suggesting that Paris wait two years before marrying the young lady, but he eventually grows adamant about the union. When Juliet refuses to marry Paris, her father cries out:

Hang thee, young baggage! disobedient wretch!

I tell thee what: get thee to a church a’ Thursday,

Or never after look me in the face.

Speak not, reply not, do not answer me! (3.5.159-63)

If she does not bend to his will, he forbids her to look at or speak to him. He even threatens to cast her out into the streets, where she must either starve or become a prostitute to survive. The fact that such grim fates are the only possibilities that await a thirteen-year-old girl outside of her

family home shows just how precarious women's positions were in Juliet's society and how little power women possessed in their own lives.

Equally subjugated, Juliet's mother "acts as the voice of Capulet, Juliet's father. Lady Capulet's own agency is silenced, if not suffocated. Consequently, her relationship with her daughter is far from close" (Hatice 42). The emotional distance between the two women stems from Lady Capulet's failure to support Juliet. Rather than providing a nurturing maternal influence, Lady Capulet takes the same disciplinary, restricting role as her husband. Fathers symbolize "ownership [and] domination" and oppose "attempts at independence" while impoverishing, constraining, undermining, and dominating those whom they influence ("Father"); thus, by using his wife as a pawn and a mouthpiece for his own will, Capulet both subjugates her and doubles his power over Juliet by making Lady Capulet a second father. Lacking even the mischievous, conspiratorial language and behavior of the Nurse, Lady Capulet is the weakest female character in the play.

Juliet, however, defies authority and in turn defies traditional gender roles. As feminist criticism has evolved, critics' views of Juliet have drastically altered: "Critical estimation of Juliet has moved from regarding her as a passive victim of 'star-crossed love' to lauding her as a self-willed, courageous, intelligent young woman who initiates and controls action in her struggle to preserve her integrity and autonomy in a world that is hostile to women," writes critic Carolyn E. Brown (333). In fact, Hatice argues that, "Despite her mother's patriarchal attitude, she [Juliet] attempts to position herself as a subject against the law of the father" (42). In a play depicting such an oppressive patriarchal society, a strong and dynamic young woman such as Juliet is a refreshing addition.

In her time, ladies had no consent over whom they would marry. Their parents, particularly their fathers, married them off to whomever they (the parents) pleased. Typically, marriages were conceived based on who could offer the greatest wealth, possessions, and status. Attachment and attraction—let alone love—were not significant factors. But Juliet marries in secret, taking agency in a matter where authority figures always prevail.

The most shocking defiance of the traditional female role occurs when Juliet proposes to Romeo, proclaiming, “If that thy bent of love be honorable, / Thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow” (2.2.150-1). Daring to address the topic of marriage with a man she just met was unheard of for a woman in Juliet’s society. Her boldness pays off, for she soon marries the man she loves. Her life ends in tragedy, suggesting that flouting authority—as she and Romeo do by marrying in secret—leads to one’s demise. Even so, Juliet’s courage and spirit are admirable and make her a fascinating, likeable figure in Shakespeare’s play.

As long as women and men struggle to overcome the stereotypes and restrictions patriarchal societies impose on them, feminist thought will have a place in the literary and cultural landscapes. More than a thrilling romance or a heartbreaking tragedy, *Romeo & Juliet*—with its representation of a patriarchal society that promotes traditional gender roles and ultimately leads to the oppression of all its people—reminds feminists of the progress that has been made and the goals that have yet to be achieved in the quest for equality.

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