

Marrying for Autonomy: A Feminist Analysis of *Romeo and Juliet*

Many Feminist scholars have written about Shakespeare's plays, including *Romeo and Juliet*, and most have focused on the oppressive society of Shakespeare's time. Scholars typically paint both Romeo and Juliet as people passively reacting to their surroundings, and not actively choosing their paths. This proves especially true for Juliet since people commonly believe that women had little agency back in Shakespeare's time. More scholars today challenge this notion, and claim that women had more rights and powers in the sixteenth century than what was originally believed. Phyllis Rackin points to the fact that when looking for information to back up one's belief, one tends to find it, and not only do people write history fairly subjectively (Rackin 18), men write their version (Rackin 9). This idea also carries into literature. The pronoun "he" was often used in literature to imply the reader, assuming the reader was either male, or the gender did not matter (Rackin 2). Despite the presence of female readers at the time, the modern audience still tends "to assume that Shakespeare's plays should be read from the point of view of a male spectator who would have responded to representations of women's power and autonomy as occasions for anxious hostility" (Rackin 3). When reading from a male perspective, readers will lose sight of the female characters, because their focus stays on the men. Men and women appear unequal because the representation lacks balance.

When flipped to a modern Feminist perspective that places women in the center and recognizes their autonomy, the women of the story shine. Of course, *Romeo and Juliet* sets up the female supporting characters for a background role by having them known only by their husbands' names, such as Capulet's Wife or Montague's Wife, or job positions, like Nurse, and only having the mothers speak about their children. When focusing on Juliet, however, readers can see how much potential the women have to fight for their own agency. Juliet contrasts with

the other female characters by actively pursuing her desires instead of relying on others to provide her with agency. Juliet fights for her autonomy throughout the play, and stands her ground when approached with options that do not fit her end goals. To support this claim, I will focus on the differences between the titular characters and compare how the differences affect their actions, analyze Juliet's role in the play and her responses to those around her, recognize her parents as antagonists, and explore Juliet's final decision to end her life. Juliet knows she can choose easier paths in life, but inevitably decides she would rather end her life than live according to anyone else's standards.

Charles E. Bressler describes Feminist literary criticism as “[advocating] for equal rights for all women . . . in all areas of life,” and as having a focus on the patriarchy (144). Feminist scholars tend to focus on the male oppressors or oppressive system. When focusing on the patriarchy, it makes sense that Feminist Shakespeare critics find numerous examples of oppression and a lack of feminine power. They focus on the male-centric environment and what the men do against the women instead of what women do on their own. However, if scholars flip the focus to find feminine power, and focus on what the women do, the feminine power becomes visible as well. This perspective does not negate history. Rather, it seeks a different version of the truth:

Feminist scholarship needs history, and it needs the analytic instruments the new historicism provides. The problem is that the conceptual categories that shape contemporary scholarly discourse, no less than the historical records of the past, are often man-made and shaped by men's anxieties, desires, and interests. As such, they constitute instruments of women's exclusion, and often of women's oppression . . . How then can we enter the discourse of current feminist/historicist Shakespeare criticism without

becoming so thoroughly inscribed within its categories that we are forced to imagine both the plays and the culture in which they were produced from a male point of view?

It is important to remember that feminist criticism began with a political agenda, although—especially in the United States—it has increasingly entered the mainstream of academic discourse . . . Adopted as a conceptual tool by women and men without a serious commitment to feminist political agendas, criticism designated as ‘feminist’ has provided arguments that can just as easily be used to naturalize women’s oppression as to oppose it. (Rackin 16)

In short, when analyzing literature, Feminist scholars must ensure that they do not erase the presence and agency, however minimal, of women. If possible, Feminist scholars should highlight the existing autonomy of the female characters in the studied literature. Using this perspective with *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet consciously fights against an oppressive system, her parents, for her bodily autonomy. She tells her parents that she does not wish to be married, and stays faithful to her ideals and morals despite the male influence around her. Juliet remains fully aware of the societal norms of her time, her parents’ wishes, and what her confidants think about her situation, but chooses to do what she wants for herself on her own.

The word “autonomy” contains numerous definitions, but one of the more practical ones states, “more generally: liberty to follow one’s will; control over one’s own affairs; freedom from external influence, personal independence” (“Autonomy, n.”). In other words, someone possesses free will and can make their decisions on their own. Someone can choose their own path in life, and has the right to live as they wish as they control their bodies. With this definition, one can begin to analyze the path Juliet takes to defend her bodily autonomy, and understand the questionable morality of her parents’ quest to control her future. While her

parents may believe they have Juliet's best interests at heart, the fact that they perpetually force their beliefs and opinions on her violates her bodily autonomy. The Nurse, Friar Laurence, and Romeo all aid Juliet in her journey and respect her autonomy, albeit with seemingly negative results.

When readers meet Juliet, they meet a young teenager with every reason to rely on her parents and Nurse. She, the thirteen-year-old daughter of affluent parents, presumably has little life experience. She could listen to every suggestion and follow every request if she wished, but she does not. When her mother asks Juliet what she thinks about marriage, Juliet responds, "It is an honour that I dream not of" (Shakespeare 1.3.68). Capulet's Wife pushes for Juliet to accept the marriage with a lengthy monologue, asking her:

CAPULET'S WIFE. What say you, can you love the gentleman?

This night you shall behold him at our feast;  
Read o'er the volume of young Paris' face,  
And find delight writ there with beauty's pen;  
Examine every married lineament,  
And see how one another lends content;  
And what obscured in that fair volume lies,  
Find written in the margent of his eyes.  
This precious book of love, this unbound lover,  
To beautify him only lacks a cover.  
The fish lives in the sea, and 'tis much pride  
For fair without the fair within to hide.  
That book in many's eyes doth share the glory

That in gold clasps locks in the golden story.  
So shall you share all he doth possess,  
By having him, making yourself no less. (1.3.81-96)

After her initial question, Capulet's Wife does not wait for an answer before moving on and informing Juliet that she will meet Paris that evening and learn all of his great qualities. Capulet's Wife makes sure to tell Juliet that Paris has pleasant physical features and money. However, when she asks Juliet again if she can "like of Paris' love" (1.3.98), Juliet only says, "I'll look to like, if looking liking move. / But no more deep will I indart mine eye / Than your consent gives strength to make it fly" (Shakespeare 1.3.99-101). In other words, Juliet says that she will try to love him, but she will not try very hard. Her mother clearly wants Juliet to feel excited and happily agree to the proposal, but Juliet stays resistant. She will not agree to love someone she has not met. She wants to feel genuine love and a real connection before agreeing to marry Paris.

While Juliet seems fairly mature, she does have an idealistic vision of love that heavily contrasts Romeo's seemingly immature views. Readers meet Romeo already heartbroken over another character, Rosaline, and only view Rosaline through conversations between Romeo and his friends, but they can infer that she did not reciprocate Romeo's feelings. Romeo spends the majority of his stage time, prior to meeting Juliet, lamenting to his friends about his failure with Rosaline. Even when meeting with Friar Laurence about marrying Juliet, the Friar asks, "Is Rosaline, that thou didst love so dear, / So soon forsaken? Young men's love then lies / Not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes" (2.2.66-68). The Friar comments that Romeo's love appears fickle, despite how passionately Romeo believes that he loves Juliet. The Friar knows not to take Romeo too seriously because of his past feelings. However, Romeo feels all of his emotions

strongly, especially love. After Tybalt kills Mercutio, Romeo demands to fight, declaring, “Either thou or I, or both, must go with him” (3.1.129). Both love and anger drive Romeo to fight to the death. When discussing Romeo’s level of love for Juliet, and how nothing can rival it, Dowden states, “No ardour of self-protection, no abandonment prepense, no self-sustained energy, can create and shape a passion of equal volume, and possessing a like certainty and directness of advance with a passion shaped, determined, and for ever re-invigorated by positive, objective fact” (Dowden 52). Despite the little time spent together, Romeo feels so strongly about Juliet that his passion for her seems almost impossible to believe. Juliet views love in a more methodical manner than Romeo, but that does not invalidate his feelings. It simply shows Juliet’s maturity and ability to handle serious matters.

The difference between Romeo’s and Juliet’s circumstances does not end with their views on love; their influences also act differently. Juliet’s main confidant, her Nurse, seems like the closest thing Juliet has to an actual friend. Juliet seeks her help in pursuing Romeo, much like how a modern woman would ask her friend to act as a wingman. The Nurse supports Juliet’s decision to pursue Romeo, but still attempts to discourage her. After Juliet sends the Nurse to meet with Romeo on her behalf, the Nurse delays delivering her news by complaining about her aching bones (2.4.25) and asking “Do you not see that I am out of breath” (2.4.29). After Juliet continues to press her, the Nurse relents, and insults Juliet’s taste in men, before complimenting Romeo:

NURSE. Well, you have made a simple choice; you know not how to choose a man.

Romeo? No, not he, though his face be better than any man’s, yet his leg excels all men’s, and for a hand and a foot and a body, though they be not to be talked on, yet they are past

compare. He is not the flower of courtesy, but I'll warrant him as gentle as a lamb. Go thy ways, wench, serve God. What, have you dined at home? (2.4.37-44)

The Nurse and Juliet have a comfortable relationship where the Nurse can joke with Juliet while maintaining a serious discussion. Juliet may feel frustrated when the Nurse continues to delay fully answering her questions with complaints about her aching head and back (2.4.47-49), and changing the subject to inquiring about Juliet's mother (2.4.56), but the Nurse does not do anything out of cruelty. The Nurse and Juliet's relationship possesses similarities to a friendship, despite their lack of equal status. The Nurse works for the Capulets, and taking care of Juliet remains her first priority. The Nurse joking around with Juliet does not mean the Nurse does not support Juliet or intends to demean her, but rather shows that the Nurse cares about Juliet's well-being. If she did not want to help Juliet at all, she would not have gone to meet Romeo in the first place, nor would she have come around to answering Juliet's questions at all. When she sees that Juliet tries to chase what will make her happy, the Nurse ultimately decides to help, but not before having her own fun. Juliet's primary support system has balance.

On the other hand, Romeo has actual friends close to his age in Benvolio and Mercutio, but they rarely give advice. Instead, they mock Romeo. After the Capulets' party, Romeo goes off on his own to find Juliet. Neither Benvolio nor Mercutio knows where he went, so Mercutio offers to call for him:

MERCUTIO. Nay, I'll conjure too.

Romeo! Humours! Madman! Passion! Lover!

Appear thou in the likeness of a sigh;

Speak but one rhyme and I am satisfied.

Cry but 'Ay me', pronounce but 'love' and 'dove';

.....

I conjure thee by Rosaline's bright eyes,  
 By her high forehead and scarlet lip,  
 By her fine foot, straight leg, and quivering thigh,  
 And the demesnes that there adjacent lie,  
 That in thy likeness thou appear to us. (2.1.7-11, 18-22)

Mercutio knows that Romeo would feel frustrated or upset if he mentioned Rosaline, so he tries to bait Romeo by teasing him. Benvolio attempts to comfort Romeo on occasion, but not without gentle teasing. When Romeo laments to him about failing to woo Rosaline, Benvolio comments, "Alas that love, so gentle in his view, / Should be so tyrannous and rough in proof" (1.1.165-66). Instead of reassuring Romeo, Benvolio tells him that he probably flirted too strongly and scared Rosaline away. Even if this truly happened, a good friend would wait until their friend had a better mental state, or they would phrase the comment in a more gentle manner. This difference in behavior shows what outside influences helped shape Romeo and Juliet's views on love. Juliet's influence sees love as something to take seriously, while Romeo's influences see it as a joke, or a nonissue. Romeo does not have a good support system. The Nurse, Mercutio, and Benvolio all joke with their respective companions, but the intentions feel different. The Nurse wants to have fun, but the goal of helping Juliet stays. Mercutio does not plan on helping Romeo sort his feelings, and Benvolio wants to help, but does not appear to take Romeo seriously. Juliet has guidance compared to Romeo, and she knows how to think for herself because she has a logical person by her side to show her how to do it well. Romeo lacks guidance, and this causes him to act in a self-destructive manner.



Another influence in Juliet's life, though far less positive, appears in the form of her mother, Capulet's Wife. Capulet's Wife does not appear much in the play, and when she does she normally talks about Juliet's impending marriage. Her role relies on other people, and the juxtaposition of Capulet's Wife's limited agency and Juliet's strong character shows not only their different roles in the play, but also hints at the negative influence Juliet's parents have on her by making her their focus. They micromanage their daughter, and infringe on her agency. Capulet's Wife specifically pushes for Juliet's marriage despite her reluctance, and despite her age. Contrary to popular belief, thirteen was unusually young for marriage in Shakespeare's time, according to societal standards. "Indeed, 14 [sic] would have been an unusually young age for marriage, and probably most of Shakespeare's would have thought it excessively young" (Young 460). Despite Capulet's Wife's experience or Paris's declaration that "Younger than she are happy mothers made" (1.2.12), there were no other expectations by society for Juliet to marry that young. This means that Capulet's Wife was justifying her pressuring her daughter by using her own experience, and was reinforced by her husband pursuing Paris, and making deals on his family's behalf:

CAPULET. But woo her, gentle Paris, and get her heart,

My will to her consent is but a part;

And she agreed, within her scope of choice

Lies my consent and fair according voice. (1.2.16-19)

Capulet tells Paris that the choice remains Juliet's, but readers eventually learn that this does not remain the case. One theory on Capulet's motivation for Juliet to marry Paris asserts that Capulet wants closer to Paris to elevate his social status. Michael Bryson states, "Capulet needs a way to best 'Old Montague,' and what better way than by matching himself to a foreign nobleman who

is kinsman to the prince—the County Paris—in order to raise the status of his family, trump Montague, and do a little flourishing in spite of him” (Bryson 394). Readers first meet Paris when he speaks with Capulet about the possible marriage, and when Paris asks Capulet how he feels about his proposal (1.2.6), Capulet suggests he “let two more summers wither in their pride / Ere we may think her ripe to be a bride” (1.2.10-11). Of course, Capulet eventually changes his mind and demands that Juliet accept the proposal, which prompts Juliet to do the extreme. Their negative influence on Juliet thrusts the Capulets into the roles of the antagonists.

The Capulets’ roles as antagonists grow to an alarming level when Juliet stands up for herself in Act 3. Capulet’s reaction to Juliet going against his expectations proves explosive, and he berates, threatens, and emotionally abuses her:

CAPULET. How, how, how, how, chopped-logic? What is this?

‘Proud’ and ‘I thank you’, and ‘I thank you not’,

And yet ‘not proud’, mistress minion you?

Thank me no thankings, nor proud me no prouds;

But fettle your fine joints ‘gainst Thursday next

To go with Paris to Saint Peter’s Church,

Or I will drag thee on a hurdle thither.

Out, you green-sickness carrion! Out, you baggage,

You tallow-face!

CAPULET’S WIFE. Fie, fie, what, are you mad?

JULIET (*kneeling*). Good father, I beseech you on my knees,

Hear me with patience but to speak a word.

CAPULET. Hang thee, young baggage, disobedient wretch!

I tell thee what: get thee to church a Thursday,  
Or never after look me in the face.  
Speak not, reply not, do not answer me.  
My fingers itch. Wife, we scarce thought us blessed  
That God had lent us but this only child;  
But now I see this one is too much,  
And that we have a curse in having her.  
Out on her, hilding! (3.5.148-67)

Her mother tells him he was harsh, but otherwise does not defend her daughter. Juliet asks her for help, but she only responds, “Talk not to me, for I’ll not speak a word. / Do as thou wilt, for I have done with thee” (3.5.202-03). She views her husband’s actions as justified, which proves to alienate their daughter. Juliet seeks out Friar Laurence to help her. When their plan fails, she inevitably decides that death is preferable to marrying a man whom she neither knows nor loves. Making rash decisions does not fit her character like it fits Romeo’s character. After seeing all of her options, Juliet makes her own decision, albeit in a highly emotional state.

Romeo’s and Juliet’s influences affect how they process their overwhelming feelings. Juliet feels more comfortable sharing her feelings, which also helps her remain levelheaded until she finds herself alone. She does not have the Nurse, her main confidant, when she needs her the most. Romeo, however, remains defensive and hotheaded. He constantly finds himself passionately defending how he feels, only to receive grief and, eventually, punishment after killing Tybalt. He feels isolated, so when he believes he has lost the one person he had left, he breaks. Romeo and Juliet may seem like immature children impulsively reacting to everything around them, but instead they simply lack direction in intense moments.

The oppression caused by her parents gives Juliet the motivation to truly fight for her agency and autonomy. Her love for Romeo certainly influences her decision, but only because she does not want to live without him, not because she believes they could stay together in the afterlife. Believing in a life together post-mortem was not common in the sixteenth century. “The idea that marriage vows would come to an end with the death of one or the other spouse was not an innovation of Protestantism. Both Catholic and Protestant theologians maintained that marital bonds were strictly mortal and had no possibility of renewal after death” (Targoff 18). While Juliet did not want to live without Romeo, she more than likely did not think they would reunite in the afterlife. That did not influence her decision. Readers can wonder if Juliet’s parents are responsible for her death and ask if Juliet would have survived the play if her parents had not pushed her towards marriage, but this path of thinking removes the power from Juliet. She knew her options, and while she did not plan on Romeo’s suicide, she did not have enough hope for a happy life without him. She could have chosen the unhappy, yet safe, option, but instead chooses to die alongside Romeo. She makes that choice on her own, and most importantly for herself.

*Romeo and Juliet* ends in tragedy, and multiple characters can carry some responsibility, but readers should not take power away from Romeo, and especially not Juliet.

Paul A. Kottman echoes the idea of Romeo and Juliet exercising their bodily autonomy during the course of the play:

I contend that Shakespeare’s play shows how Romeo and Juliet are formed as subjects through acts of mutual self-recognition that mute such conflicts. Such acts constitute a love affair.

*Romeo and Juliet* is the drama of a struggle for individual freedom and self-realization, and this drama has a tragic structure. However, the tragic core of our

self-realization springs not from our personal struggles with external social or natural necessities but from the dawning realization that nothing, not even mortality, separates or individuates us absolutely. This awakening leads Romeo and Juliet to the realization that, if they are to claim their lives as their own, they must somehow actualize their separateness for themselves, through one another. (Kottman 5-6)

Both Romeo and Juliet have familial obligations that others expect them to maintain. Instead of outright abandoning those obligations for love, they try to satisfy all involved parties. The difference lies in how that works. Not many characters tell Romeo what to do, but everyone tells Juliet what to do. Some believe they have her interests at heart, and some truly do have her best interests in mind. Romeo's family and friends recognize his autonomy from the start, but Juliet has to fight for hers, except with Romeo. Only Juliet herself truly knows what she wants, and she decides that she no longer wants to live in a world where she has to choose between her family and living as she wishes. She decides to not live without the person who recognized her autonomy, and worked with her to exercise it. Readers should accept her decision without contention or ridicule, because if they challenge her decision, they missed the point.

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