

AQA English Literature GCSE

Romeo and Juliet: Themes *Gender Roles*

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Gender Roles

Gender is an important theme within Romeo and Juliet as it contributes to the characters and their development. However, it can still be a **source of conflict** as the characters do not always adhere to the roles which they are traditionally supposed to fulfil. It is important to note that even though the play is set in a **patriarchal society** which was oppressive to women, men also had their own social rules that they had to follow.



Masculinity and violence

The concept of masculinity is a key theme in Romeo Juliet as it **dictates** the way in which the male characters behave towards each other and the female characters.

<https://images.pexels.com/photos/1722196/pexels-photo-1722196.jpeg?auto=compress&cs=tinysrgb&dpr=3&h=750&w=1260>

From the beginning of the play we know there is a feud between the Montagues and Capulets however the audience doesn't know the cause of this. Instead, all they are told in the **prologue** is that it is an **"ancient grudge"**. No one knows what the feud is about and so it has been manipulated into something based on male pride, with no side willing to back down to create peace.

Masculinity and male pride is often associated with destructive behaviour, as shown in **Act 1 Scene 1**. The fact Shakespeare positions this scene as the opening one is a **structural tactic** to show how male **conflict** and **violence pervades** the play. It also presents to the audience the calibre of the feud and the lengths that men will go to defend their pride.

Men had a similar entrapment to women as they had to adhere to the attributes of **machismo** (hyper sense of masculinity). While women seem to be controlled by the whims and desires of their male counterparts; men seem to be controlled by the very **concept of masculinity**.

An argument begins between men from each household. As neither side are prepared to lose face and back down a fight starts.

→ Abraham asks **"Do you bite your thumb at me, sir?"** The simple question leads into a fight.

→ This fight is escalated by the **"fiery Tybalt"** who exclaims he **"hates"** the word peace, **"Hell"** and the **"Montagues"**. In essence, the men would **rather fight than be perceived as cowards**.

Hegemonic masculinity

In the first scene, the character of Sampson is a tool by Shakespeare to express the traditional beliefs of masculinity. Sampson believes in what some call **hegemonic masculinity** which is the idea that **male dominance is established through the submission of women as well as the excursion of their aggression**.

- Sampson (a Capulet) argues that **"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"**.



This belief encapsulates what it was to be a man in Elizabethan times. It is filled with **violence** and **aggression** as well as the **submission of women** and **sexual imagery**.

Sampson states that he will **“push Montague’s men from the wall”** and then take their women and **“thrust his maids to the wall”**, this **crude language** is suggestive of rape. The men feel as though they have the right to do this because women are the **“weaker vessels”**. This phrase is **Biblical allusion** from **1 Peter 3:7** which tells men to **‘honour their wives’** because they are the **“weaker vessels”**.

Shakespeare uses this ironically as he has flipped the verse upside down. While the Bible uses women’s supposed weakness as a reason for men to be kind Sampson uses it as a reason to take advantage. This is interesting to note as it tells the audience a lot about the character of Sampson as well as the way the idea of masculinity has evolved.

Similar to the way that no one knows what the **“ancient grudge”** is about and so it has been degraded to just male pride, the concept of masculinity which was once about honour is compromised and is just a **show of violence and aggression**.

This is also supported by the **crude language** by Sampson as he talks about his **“naked weapon”** being out. This has a double meaning as it can **literally** be about his weapon as they are about to engage in a fight. However it could be meant **figuratively** as a **sexual innuendo** of a phallic image (here his penis is a weapon which can be used against women). The fact that he talks of it as a weapon expresses again reinforces the **male domination** over women.

Romeo’s masculinity

It is important to know that throughout the **arc of the play** the audience never gets to see Romeo’s natural disposition. The audience only sees him when he is suffering from being lovesick over his infatuation with Rosaline or when he is madly in love with Juliet. In some ways, Romeo has **no identity free of emotional attachments** and could therefore be considered an **effeminate character**.

Act 1 Scene 1

Through **Act 1 Scene 1** Shakespeare presents the typical traits of masculinity (strength, power and aggression) through the male characters within the fight. This hypermasculinity is exemplified by the behaviour and language used by Tybalt and Sampson.

This masculinity is immediately **juxtaposed** by Shakespeare’s portrayal of Romeo. Shakespeare **feminises** Romeo and therefore **subverts the masculinity** created in the opening scene.

- He is described as having **“tears”** and **“adding to clouds more clouds with his deep sighs”**. The image created is not one of a **hegemonic** man but instead of a wounded soul, a **courtly lover suffering from unrequited love** from Rosaline.



https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/b/bb/Broken_heart.svg/249px-Broken_heart.svg.png



Instead of engaging with a battle as his family did in the opening scene, Romeo takes an early morning walk **“underneath the grove of sycamore”**.

→ While this image was not that of a traditional Elizabethan male, the **image** is not foreign to the audience as Romeo is acting like a Petrarchan lover.

Petrarchan Lover

A **petrarchan lover** is a man who is suffering from **unrequited love**. Unrequited love is when love isn't reciprocated (you love someone and they don't feel the same way - much like being put in the 'friend zone'). Petrarchan lovers were often melodramatic about their rejection and would go into a **state of depression** whereby they could not eat or sleep.

→ Shakespeare implies that Romeo is in this state as he **“away from light steals home”** which shows the audience that he stayed up all night and only went home as the sun was rising.

The development of Romeo's masculinity

Romeo **struggles** with his masculinity throughout the play. External factors (such as the influence of other characters) are portrayed as being the cause of this struggle.

Relationships with women

Shakespeare shows how affected Romeo is by his love for women. When Romeo starts crying the Friar tells him to **“Hold thy desperate hand. Art thou a man? Thy form cries out thou art. Thy tears are womanish.”**. This statement encapsulates the societal attitudes of the time. The fact that an important figurehead such as the Friar said this shows how widespread these beliefs of masculinity were, a modern-day audience may call this **toxic masculinity**.

Romeo admits that his love for Juliet has made him soft.

O sweet Juliet, / Thy beauty hath made me effeminate, / And in my temper softened valor's steel! (Act III Scene i)

Romeo blames his femininity on Juliet. The **metaphor** comparing his **“valour”** to **“steel”** suggests that he feels as though his bravery should be strong and moving but Juliet has **“softened”** it. The **exclamation mark** at the end expresses his emotions and also his conviction in the statement, he believes it to be fact and so leaps to the other end of the spectrum seeking to avenge his **“friend”**;

Masculine

Throughout the play, Romeo's character develops as he transforms from a Petrarchan lover to someone who allows **“rage to guide (his) actions”** after his **“friend”** Mercutio is killed by the Capulet Tybalt.

→ Here it is murder and revenge (both masculine acts) which has caused Romeo to refind his masculinity.

Romeo becomes consumed with a **murderous “rage”** which leads to him and Tybalt fighting and Tybalt's death. Romeo says before they fight that Mercutio is waiting in heaven **“above our heads staying for thine (Tybalt) to keep him company.”**

It is interesting to note that before Mercutio's death he puts a **curse** on the families saying **“A plague o' both your houses!”**. It is possible that this curse is responsible for Romeo's



transformation. However, an alternative explanation could be that the death caused Romeo to recalculate what was important to him, stating ***“Thy (Juliet) beauty hath made me effeminate And in my temper softened valor’s steel!”***.

After this experience, Romeo’s anger is quenched and he maintains his previous demeanour. Shakespeare may be trying to tell the audience that **anger, violence and aggression** are just a part of what it meant to be a man.

The role of women

While the male characters struggle to navigate what it is to be a man within the confines of Elizabethan’s societal expectations surrounding masculinity, the women are also restricted by their role as women within society.

Marriage

During the Elizabethan period marriage was often used by important families as a way of making new alliances and spreading their power and influence. Daughters were often married off by their fathers who decided on a suitable man for them to marry. This sort of arrangement is how the audience is first introduced to Juliet.

Romeo and Juliet is set in Verona during the **Elizabethan period** and while there was a female monarch at the time, the era was still incredibly **patriarchal**. This meant that women were meant to be submissive and were thought of as property.

Act 1 Scene 2 shows Paris asking Lord Capulet for Juliet’s hand in marriage. However, at this point in the play Lord Capulet doesn’t act like a normal Elizabethan father, instead he wants his daughter to be older before she marries and also wants Juliet to marry someone she loves.

→ He says ***“But woo her, gentle Paris, get her heart. My will to her consent is but a part.”*** This implies that Juliet has a choice in who she marries and that if she doesn’t like Paris then she won’t have to marry him.

However, this perceived choice in future partner is short lived. After Tybalt’s death Lord Capulet changes his mind and agrees to let Paris marry Juliet. He asks his wife to tell Juliet, saying ***“Have you delivered to her our decree?”***. The word **“decree”** has connotations with **law** and **royalty**. Here it is evident that Lord Capulet believes he is a king in his own home and so everything he says goes.

Lord Capulet’s true **authoritarian demeanour** is revealed when Juliet refuses to marry Paris saying ***“I will not marry yet”***. This created an explosive response from Lord Capulet. He calls his daughter ***“Unworthy as she is, that we have wrought So worthy a gentleman to be her bride”*** saying that if she does not do as she is told he ***“will drag thee on a hurdle thither. Out, you green sickness, carrion! Out, you baggage!”***. The **listing** of insults used encapsulates her father’s lack of respect for his daughter. The use of **punctuation** breaks up Lord Capulet’s speech and suggests how emotional and outraged he was at this attempt of insolence.



Mother

A woman's role within the play was to become a wife and mother. In **Act 1** Lady Capulet talks about how she fears her daughter, who is only 14, will die unmarried. She says her daughter should start to **“think of marriage now”** because girls **“Younger than (Juliet) Here in Verona”** have gotten married.

Juliet's mother even comments that she was Juliet's **“mother much upon these years”** which means that Lady Capulet was already wedded with a child by the time she was Juliet's age.

Sexual objects

Women are not just seen as wives and mothers within the play but they are also perceived by men as **sexual objects**.

In **Act 2 Scene 1** Mercutio **subverts the convention of romantic poetry** when describing Rosaline's body. He **lists her body parts** saying; **“I conjure thee by Rosaline's bright eyes,/By her high forehead and her scarlet lip, /By her fine foot, straight leg, and quivering thigh,”**. Here, Mercutio is **sexualising** Rosaline's body and seeing her purely as an object for sexual gratification. Moreover, the Friar notes **“Young men's love lies not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes”**.

Sexual subservience

However, sexualisation isn't just limited to the men within the play. Juliet's nurse makes many sexual jokes and makes fun of women's **sexual subservience**.

→ She tells a story and quotes her husband who jokes about a baby who fell and says that **“Thou wilt fall backward when thou comest to age”**. This is a sexual joke in which they are making fun of a woman's sexual subordination.

- ◆ The fact that the nurse retells this joke could mean that she agreed with it. This would mean that women in the play now believe what they have been taught to believe, they accept their subordination.

→ She also talks about how Juliet will **“rest but little”** when Romeo visits. This is filled with **dramatic irony** as the audience know that Juliet will soon be dead (resting in peace), which fills the beginning of the scene with new tension.

- ◆ The **fast transition** from these jokes to her sorrow at finding a **‘dead’** Juliet shows once more the fast pace and action that has rushed the course of the play.



https://cdn.pixabay.com/photo/2019/02/28/11/42/freedom-4025802_1280.jpg

Juliet's freedom

Despite Juliet being constrained by the patriarchal society she lives in, Shakespeare gives her power within the play. She is given **agency** and **stands up to male figures**. There are very few works of Shakespeare in which women are one of the leads so it is possible that



Shakespeare used Juliet as an opportunity to **challenge gender conventions** of the time. She dares to defy men, and in some way is **liberated** by her defiance.

Courtship

Juliet **claims her agency** by **actively pursuing** her relationship with Romeo. Normally in courtship the male would actively pursue a passive female for her hand in marriage. However, Juliet plays an **active role** in their relationship instead of a passive one. She does not wait around for Romeo to find her but instead uses the Nurse and Friar to help facilitate their relationship and marriage.

She also **breaks conventions** through proposing to Romeo. She demands that he shows his devotion to her saying ***“If that thy bent of love be honorable, Thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow”***. This **assertive sentence** identifies Juliet as a girl who knows what she wants and is not afraid of the consequences of her desires.

Sexuality

Another way in which Juliet reclaims her agency is through **embracing her sexuality** which is something that women were not supposed to do at the time. Instead, they were meant to be conservative; for example, in the rules of **courtly love** the woman is supposed to refuse the man's advancements.

The fact that Juliet does not refuse Romeo's advances and instead encourages them would have seemed like odd behaviour to an Elizabethan audience.

- She says ***“I have bought the mansion of a love, But not possessed it, and though I am sold, Not yet enjoyed.”*** This means that Juliet has fallen in love with Romeo so she now belongs to him. However, she points out that she has not been **“possessed”** by him. The **verb** is **sexual innuendo**, illustrating to the audience that Juliet desires to be with Romeo sexually.

Death

When considering what kind of message Shakespeare is giving the audience through Juliet's death there are different possibilities. There isn't a right answer here and it's something you will grapple with and change your mind over the more you read the play.

- Juliet has **agency** and decides to make her own choices throughout the play. The consequences of these actions are her death. What kind of message is this sending women in the audience?
 - ◆ Through death Juliet can no longer defy the men who have power over her, she has been silenced forever.
- Juliet **affirms her freedom** by choosing to die. She did not get murdered but instead took back her **autonomy** by committing suicide. She finally found freedom in the afterlife instead of spending her life being constrained by her marriage to Paris.
- If Juliet has committed suicide because of a man is she really liberated? Instead she died because she was so **“possessed”** by a man she could not live without him.

Are there other readings of her death you can think of? Was Shakespeare trying to send a message to his audience or was the story purely for entertainment?

