
The Discourse of Misogyny in Romeo and Juliet

Feminist literary criticism has become an integral part of the way in which we study literature in the 21st century. By analyzing the way in which the female condition is represented in works of literature, we can establish how women were repressed in the patriarchal societies of the past. The issue of misogyny is prevalent in a large amount of classic literature and poetry, with well-known authors such as Jonathan Swift, Ernest Hemingway, and William Shakespeare being scrutinized for the way in which they portrayed women in their work. Many scholars and critics have examined William Shakespeare's body of work and have argued that he is discriminatory towards women, particularly in plays such as *Richard III* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, while others have argued he promotes female equality in plays like *Twelfth Night* and *Macbeth*. By examining the roles of female characters and their interactions with men in *Romeo and Juliet*, as well as the excessive promotion of marriage and the importance placed upon female beauty rather than character, it can be argued that William Shakespeare exhibited misogynistic tendencies.

While *Romeo and Juliet* is not among the Shakespearian plays typically examined for instances of misogyny, the potential to argue that it exists within what is considered to be one of the most tragic love stories of all time is too great to ignore. The female characters in the play can be seen functioning as nothing more than sources of pleasure for the men to draw upon, either through sexual means, conveying crude humor, or using them as an excuse to engage in acts of sex and violence. For instance, the character of the Nurse is depicted in scenarios of blatant sexual references at her expense, such as when she is seen with Romeo, Mercutio, and Peter. Without any prompting, Mercutio makes a nasty remark to the nurse: "A bawd, a bawd, a bawd. So ho!" (2.4 132). Here, Mercutio is accusing the nurse of being a bawd, acting as a go-between for Romeo and Juliet, to organize sexual intercourse (Bladen, 2011). Mercutio's cry of "So ho!" suggests that the Nurse would only be viewed as sexually arousing if one was desperate, and "his language doesn't stray from a sexual theme throughout this scene and it is clear that he views women only as sexual objects, unworthy of diverting Romeo from the male social group" (Bladen, 2011).

The male and female character interaction in *Romeo and Juliet* is ripe with misogyny in terms of the relation between sex and violence. At the very beginning of the play, in Act 1, scene 1, Gregory and Sampson make a disturbing joke about raping and killing the Montague women, with Sampson saying: "When I have fought with the men, I will be civil / with the maids; I will cut off their heads" (23-24) and "Ay, the heads of the maids, or their maiden- / heads. Take it in what sense thou wilt" (26-27). Here, the Capulet servants are making the connection between sex and violence, taking humorous pleasure in the notion of raping and beheading the

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Montague women. It's not enough for them to simply murder the women; they must engage in the violent act of rape as well, a clearly misogynistic addition to the already gruesome crime. Although this is presented in the form of a joke, and while the interaction is purely hypothetical, it reveals the disturbing way in which men viewed women – as powerless sex objects.

The excessive promotion of marriage in the play also reinforces the misogynistic notion of women as powerless and sex objects (and sometimes both). This is especially true in the case of Capulet and Lady Capulet. There is no affection from Capulet to Lady Capulet; the closest instance is when he calls upon her to share his grief over the loss of Juliet in Act 5, scene 3: "O heavens! O wife, look how our daughter bleeds!" (210). Even in this example, he is "simply including her in a feeling that is paternal and familial, and he calls her, as he always does, simply 'wife'" (Lerner, 1986). The character of Lady Capulet is given no identity, and receives no feelings as an individual; she is essentially powerless and proves that marriage and romance are not necessarily intertwined (Lerner, 1986). The fact that Shakespeare refused to allow one of the few female characters in the play experience any sense of personal identity or feelings is suggestive of misogyny – certainly the male characters are allowed to express their thoughts and feelings at regular intervals, and one would think that marriage would prove a suitable reason for both a man and a woman to express their feelings.

The excessive promotion of marriage consumes the character of Juliet in particular. By Act 1, scene 3, Juliet's mother, Lady Capulet, is already pressuring her to consider marrying Paris:

Well, I 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 now a maid. Thus, then, in brief:

The valiant Paris seeks you for his love.

(75-80)

In this passage, Lady Capulet is promoting the idea of marriage to her daughter, explaining that at Juliet's age, she was already a mother; by contrast, Juliet is a virgin. This unnecessary promotion of marriage is especially evident in Juliet's age – she is a mere fourteen years old, practically a child. This urging of Juliet to marry Paris appears to be Lady Capulet's only

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function in the play, and this function serves her husband, Capulet. Capulet, although originally reluctant to have Juliet marry Paris so young, does want the two to get married, as it would provide the Capulets with a higher social status due to Paris's rank as a kinsman of Prince Escalus. The important aspect to consider here is Lady Capulet's promotion of marriage serving as an element of her husband's agenda. As a man, Capulet is the one with all the power and control; Lady Capulet is merely the messenger. This is indicative of further misogyny on Shakespeare's part, although it is veiled through the convention of marriage and its excessive promotion.

The misogyny present through the importance placed upon beauty rather than character, however, is not as veiled as the excessive promotion of marriage. Shakespeare illustrates this superficial perspective quite aptly in the characters of Romeo and Benvolio. At the beginning of the play, Romeo is pining over the unseen character of Rosaline; as a solution, Benvolio instructs Romeo to compare Rosaline's appearance with that of other girls at the Capulet's feast:

At this same ancient feast of Capulet's
Supps the fair Rosaline whom thou so loves,
With all the admired beauties of Verona.
Go thither, and with unattained eye
Compare her face with some that I shall show,
And I will make thee think thy swan a crow.

(1.2 89-94)

In this passage, Benvolio places no significance upon the character of women. He solely considers their outward appearance, telling Romeo that once he sees the other 'beauties of Verona', and compares Rosaline's physical appearance with theirs, he will find her as unattractive as a crow. This preoccupation with female beauty is misogynistic. Shakespeare is suggesting that women can only be of value to men based on their appearance, and that any romantic or emotional attachment to a female can be discarded once a better-looking one comes along. It completely disregards any notion that a woman might have character or substance, choosing to degrade them to a set of pre-approved attributes of beauty, and nothing more.

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This same disposition is also evident when Romeo sees Juliet for the first time: “It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night / As a rich jewel in an Ethiop’s ear - / Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear” (1.5 52 – 54). Romeo is immediately enamored by Juliet’s beauty, and nothing more. He declares that she stands out in the darkness, the same way an earring would stand out against the dark skin color of an African; he then claims that she is too beautiful, that her beauty is too good for the world. He goes on to discuss Juliet’s beauty in greater detail, but has already made it evident that he sees nothing but her outward appearance. Romeo has ruined any chance of Juliet impressing him with substance or character, and has condemned her to a role that consists purely of physical beauty.

Having examined the issue of misogyny in *Romeo and Juliet* through the way in which female and male characters interact, the excessive promotion of marriage, and the artificial importance of beauty over substance, it is evident that Shakespeare exhibited misogynistic tendencies. Although the problem of misogyny exists in a plethora of classic literature and poetry from past centuries, second wave feminism has drawn attention to the issue and the importance of promoting gender equality. We are fortunate enough to live in an era where female characters full of substance are no longer non-existent, but it is only through pursuing feminist literary criticism and the waves of feminism to eradicate misogyny that such an era exists at all.

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