

An Exploration of Gender in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

By Brianna Edwards for EGL120: The 'English' Tradition: An Introduction to Literary Studies

Through three distinctive representations of gender, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) destabilises the notion that masculinity and femininity are binary oppositions. To challenge these stereotypical constructions of gender, *Romeo and Juliet* represents masculine and feminine traits as being accessible by both genders, challenging conventional patriarchal beliefs. The characterisation of Romeo as the submissive and effeminate gender role rejects the patriarchal expectation of male strength. In contrast to this, the other men in the play serve as counterparts to this role, in particular the character Sampson, who asserts his masculinity through violence and sexual remarks. Women also challenge the patriarchal belief of being submissive, with Juliet assuming a dominant and forceful role throughout the play, by projecting an independent and assertive voice. Through these challenging representations of gender, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* rejects patriarchal ideologies and redefines gender roles as encompassing both masculinity and femininity.

Romeo and Juliet challenges the traditional representation of masculinity through the characterisation of Romeo as effeminate and submissive, thus revealing gender roles to be fluid. In Act II Scene II, as Romeo stands below Juliet on the balcony, he is positioned as inferior to her, both literally and figuratively. Through the use of metaphor and simile, Shakespeare compares Juliet to an angel: "O, speak again, bright angel, for thou art / As glorious to this night, being o'er my head, / As is a winged messenger of heaven" (2.2.26-28). By idealising Juliet akin to a celestial being above him, Romeo assumes the subservient role in the relationship, challenging the traditional dominant role of the patriarchy that men would typically assert. Romeo's effeminate role is also noticed by other characters, with the author using the simile, "I'll warrant him as gentle as a lamb" (2.5.37) to describe Romeo's docile nature. Through this characterisation, it is revealed that men are able to identify with more passive traits, as Marianne Novy states that Romeo transcends stereotypes and aggressions of the outside world (Novy, 1984). Furthermore, through the use of hyperbole, Romeo is quick to surrender his name for love: "Call me but love, and I'll be new baptiz'd; / Henceforth I never will be Romeo" (2.2.50-51). Traditionally, it is the female who gives up her name in marriage, once again positioning Romeo as the submissive gender role. This consequently destabilises the typical masculine gender identity and challenges the patriarchal ideologies of the time. This is reinforced by Jocelyn Crawley who believes Romeo does not conform to the patriarchal system (Crawley, 2010). Through the feminine characterisation of Romeo, it is evident that the stereotypical depiction of male masculinity is challenged, revealing that femininity is not exclusive to one gender.

In contrast to Romeo's passive and feminine gender role, *Romeo and Juliet* depicts the other male characters in the play as typical chauvinistic men of the patriarchal system, in particular

the ancillary character Sampson. Sampson's characterisation serves as a foil to Romeo's, and through sexual puns he asserts his masculinity, adding to the comedic sub-genre of the play:

'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 (1.1.15-18).

By depicting women as 'weaker vessels' and equating his masculinity with violence, Sampson is implying it is his prerogative as a man to take women by force, (Kahn, 1977) thus reflecting the patriarchal ideologies of the Elizabethan society in which men were a dominant force. While this does not challenge society's beliefs at the time, *Romeo and Juliet* included these patriarchal views as a means of representing the audience's knowledge of masculinity and contrasting this against the unconventional effeminate characterisation of Romeo, illustrating the mutability of gender roles. Once again, Sampson's character draws on sexual innuendos to prove his masculinity when he says, "My naked weapon is out. Quarrel! I will back thee" (1.1.30). By validating his masculinity through the phallic violence of sword fighting, sexual acts are linked with aggression and violence, rather than pleasure and love, consequently positioning Sampson as a contrast to Romeo's more passive and romantic character (Kahn, 1977; Bloom, 2009). By juxtaposing these two male characters, *Romeo and Juliet* evokes the idea that while this patriarchal masculinity exists, it is only one layer to the multifaceted male identity.

The male gender identity is not the only gender construction to be destabilised in *Romeo and Juliet*, as through her assertive voice and actions, Juliet unmask the notion that women are submissive and weak. Throughout the play, the use of bird imagery and metaphors are repeatedly employed, with Juliet alluding to Romeo as her pet bird in the lines, "Hist! Romeo, hist! —Oh, for a falconer's voice, To lure this tassel-gentle back again!" (2.2.161-162) and "'Tis almost morning. I would have thee gone. And yet no further than a wanton's bird" (2.2.179-180). By referring to Romeo as her bird, Juliet is positioned as the assertive and dominant role in their relationship, as she is effectively taming Romeo as her pet. Mansour Wisam believes Juliet demonstrates her autonomy and masculinity through her words, as she endeavours to train and discipline Romeo, much alike the dominating relationship between a bird and its trainer (Wisam, 2008). This defies the gender standard for women by revealing that women are able to identify with more masculine gender roles rather than being weak and subservient. In the final lines of the play, *Romeo and Juliet* supports this idea through the concluding rhyming couplet, which reinforces the tragic genre of the play: "For never was a story of more woe than this of Juliet and her Romeo" (5.3.325-326). Traditionally, as part of a patriarchal society, it would be the man's name that appears first when listed, however Juliet has assumed this dominant and possessive role and Romeo becomes an extension of her (Brown, 1996). By positioning Juliet as the assertive role in the relationship, the patriarchal expectation for women to be subservient is unhinged, exposing that women are able to identify with the masculine gender role, as masculinity and femininity are not binary oppositions.

By characterising Romeo, Sampson and Juliet with distinctive gender traits, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* deconstructs the idea that masculinity and femininity are exclusive to their traditional genders. *Romeo and Juliet* juxtaposes Romeo's effeminate role against the chauvinistic nature of Sampson to reveal that men can identify with either gender role. Likewise, Juliet is positioned as a strong and assertive force throughout the play, exposing that females can also possess masculine qualities. By revealing that masculinity and femininity are not binary oppositions, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* consequently destabilises the notion that society must conform the restrictive patriarchal construction of gender.

List of References

- Bloom, H 2009, 'William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet: Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations', *Infobase Publishing*, New York, viewed 26 May 2016, <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=6jRRnz32wmgC&redir_esc=y>.
- Brown, CE 1996, 'Juliet's Taming of Romeo', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 333-355, doi:10.2307/450952
- Crawley, J 2010, 'On Gender and Identity in Three Shakespearean Texts', thesis, *Georgia State University*, Georgia, viewed 28 May 2016, <http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=honors_theses>.
- Kahn, C 1977, 'Coming of Age in Verona', *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 5-22, doi:10.2307/3194631
- Novy, M 1984, 'Love's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare', *The University of North Carolina Press*, Chapel Hill, viewed 27 May 2016, <https://books.google.com.au/books/about/Love_s_Argument.html?id=RqplAAAAMAAJ&redir_esc=y>.
- Wisam, M 2008, 'The Taming of Romeo and Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet', *The Explicator*, vol. 66, no. 4, pp. 206-208, doi:10.3200/EXPL.66.4.206-208