"Wedded to Calamity": Considering Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* Against the Popular Conduct Literature of the Renaissance

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Romeo and Juliet has been interpreted by readers and critics alike as a tragedy for the "star-cross'd lovers" who are denied the right to freely choose and love. However, many other elements of this play would have concerned Renaissance theater patrons. Just as our opinions are influenced by television, radio and newspapers, so too were some Renaissance playgoers affected by the media of their day, conduct books. Largely due to the influence of conduct manuals, most contemporary audience members would have seen the flaws in the macrocosm that corrupted the microcosm of Romeo and Juliet's world. The collapse of the support system for the young couple begins at the top. The prince of Verona fails to control his subjects. Juliet's parents, particularly her father, sets a bad example and continually makes poor choices. The Roman Catholic Church is at fault as well, for the friar whom the pair trusts also misguides them. Lastly, because the couple has no strong adult to turn to, they are forced to rely on their own immature abilities to reason. The combined effects of all these factors result in tragedy.

Conduct literature, whether in the form of chapbooks, pamphlets, or more learned discourses, all helped Shakespeare's audience see the progressing and compounding problems that lead to the inevitable conclusion. It is hard to overestimate their influence. Chapbooks, among the most popular forms of literature available, were distributed everywhere, in open-air markets, on the streets, and throughout the countryside by peddlers.[1] Even the illiterate knew their contents well, as those who could read, read to those who could not, in taverns, fairs and elsewhere.[2] The popularity of this literature was not limited to the poor or lower classes. Upper class readers were not above spending pennies for popular works.[3]

A particular chapbook that enjoyed great success across class lines was Philip Stubbes's work, *A christall glass for christian women.*[4] The theme of *A christall glass* is similar to most of the other conduct books of the time. "Conduct books," explains historian Ann Rosalind Jones, "appear to be based on an assumption that men and women can be *produced.* They are malleable, capable of being trained—proper instruction can fashion them into successful participants in the new social setting and the etiquette belonging to them."[5] This tenet, as will be seen, is certainly a component of *Romeo and Juliet*, albeit by working in reverse.

Besides chapbooks, prescriptions for the betterment of society could also be found in pamphlets that impressed upon readers the morality of the Protestant faith juxtaposed against the evils of Catholicism. For example, a popular tract titled *A pitilesse mother* tells the tale of "a woman who in her eagerness for salvation, falls into the hands of a bloodthirsty Roman Catholic priest, who convinces her that the killing of Protestants is a good deed and that the murder of her young children will save her from heresy."[6] Other tracts, such as ones that appeared in 1599, depicted cloisters where "lascivious nuns conspire to hide the fruits of their fornication."[7] All in all, revealing the supposed corruption of Roman Catholics was a frequent and popular target in pamphlets. The perceived depravity of the Catholic faith, so proliferate in the conduct manuals, is also a component of this play.

Romeo and Juliet also explores the more complicated debates that were occurring within the conduct literature. More erudite discussions could be found in books that required a higher degree of literacy.[8] One of the most widely read books on conduct available was Edmund Tilney's discourse *The Flowers of Friendship*, which went through a total of seven editions in the late sixteenth century.[9] It was one of many conduct books to tackle issues of "love and power, and public and private duty."[10] On the surface, one might think that such conduct literature would offer a definitive prescription for society's ills. In Italy, where the play is set, conduct manuals were, in fact, explicit. Rudolph Bell unequivocally says that Italian conduct manuals advised that "the way to get along was for the husband to command and the wife to obey."[11] "No other reading of these texts could come to any other conclusion," he insists.[12]

In England, however, the expectations for moral conduct were shifting. By 1568, a woman was sitting on the throne of England and "the conduct of marriage had far-reaching consequences."[13] People had to seriously consider what it meant for society to have a woman in power. Was patriarchy being threatened? If so, what should the conduct literature advocate? It was a touchy situation. Authors of conduct literature could not insult the queen, but they also saw the problems created by the chipping away of patriarchal authority. It is not surprising, then, that in this state of flux the conduct manuals often contradict one another. "When the texts are not able to contain the exposure of their contradictions, they become neither fully supportive of their dominant ideologies nor entirely subversive," argues Valerie Wayne. "Instead they are sufficiently open as text to be capable of multiple interpretations"[14]

This back and forth consideration of the issues of moral conduct in a time when values are changing is precisely what is portrayed in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet.* He appears to be considering the consequences of the new movement and the possible re-alignment of patriarchy, but does so by safely removing the conflict to another part of the world. "Let's see what happens when the old norms are removed, when people in authority do not follow the proper rules, and when young people subvert the system," Shakespeare seems to be saying. Looked at in this light, the play is less a romantic plea for choice than a warning to the populace about the dangers of upsetting the system and the problems caused by players who do not follow the established rules.

Echoes of the conduct literature and popular opinion in general can be heard in the opening scene of the play. Two servants of the Capulet household, Gregory and Sampson, are discussing women. Provoked by Gregory, Sampson remarks, "Tis true, and therefore women, being the weaker vessels, are ever thrust to the wall" (1.1.14-15). This reference to women being the "weaker vessels" is a notion that originally comes from the Bible and first appeared in the New Testament translation by William Tyndale in 1526.[15] It is a concept hammered away at by the conduct book writers.

Ruth Kelso looked at literally hundreds of Renaissance texts and compiled her findings in *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance.* Her conclusion, based on over eight hundred documents, was that between 1400 and 1600, "even relatively progressive writers held to a theory of not one but two human races: naturally superior men and naturally inferior women."[16] Katherine Usher Henderson and Barbara McManus concur with Kelso, pointing out that the 'Homily on Marriage" was required by the Crown to be read in church from 1562 onward. The 'Homily" stressed the natural inferiority of women.[17] In part, it reads, "The woman is a weak creature not endued with like strength and constancy of mind. . . . [T]hey are more prone to all weak affections and dispositions of mind, more than men be."[18] Lest one failed to get the message from church or treatises, common proverbs also reinforced the idea of woman as the "weaker vessel." John Ray's *Collection of English Proverbs* lists one hundred and two Renaissance axioms about women, nearly all derogatory.[19] Thus, hearing women called "weaker vessels" in Shakespeare's play was hardly surprising to his audience. It was an opinion so widely held that it is unlikely anyone in the theater would have questioned such a statement.

What is surprising is the way in which Shakespeare shows what can happen to vulnerable young people when patriarchy fails to provide them adequate counsel. The problems begin at the top. If the power of the crown had been properly exercised, the streets of Verona would not have been in turmoil. This inadequacy of leadership filters down the ranks and is perpetuated by two of the city's elite families, the Capulets and the Montagues. The citizens of Verona, siding with either the Montagues or the Capulets, are at each other's throats. They shout, "Clubs, bills and partisans! Strike! Beat them down! / Down with the Capulets! Down with the / Montagues!" (1.1.70-72). Clearly there has been a breakdown in leadership and the result is a city in chaos.

The problems of Verona are made more apparent with the first appearance of Lord Capulet. Hearing the commotion, this supposed leader emerges in a dressing gown, "in characteristic rashness."[20] Contemporary audiences would have immediately perceived this behavior as dangerous. English authors of conduct literature advocated a society "ruled by reason."[21] To come out into a hostile crowd looking undignified for one thing, and unarmed for another, is undoubtedly rash. Conduct writers suggest that "both individuals' actions and the world around them respond to conscious efforts of control."[22] Shakespeare turns this maxim on its ear by exhibiting Capulet's considerable lack of conscious control. It is one of the earliest indicators in *Romeo and Juliet* that the playwright intends to see what will happen when patriarchal control is lax or nonexistent.

Another crack in the system appears post-haste. The Lady at Lord Capulet's side further magnifies the man's lack of control. As he prepares to enter the fray, saying to his wife, "What noise is this? Give me my long sword, ho!" she replies sarcastically, "A crutch! A crutch! Why call you for a sword?" (1.1.73-74). Lady Capulet is denigrating her husband and committing a cardinal sin in the eyes of the conduct writers and, by extension, their readership: she is using her tongue as a weapon and undermining his authority. In essence, she is calling him old and feeble and therefore incapable of fighting. Audiences would be more than aware of the terrors of the tongue from the conduct books. *All* decried a woman's shrewish behavior. One widely distributed conduct pamphlet in England was *Pinnying of the Basket,* "a tale of the horrors that can result when women's speech degrades the authority of men."[23] Like the woman in *Pinnying,* Lady Capulet emasculates her husband through the power of her words.

Pinnying is just one example of the plethora of conduct literature that advocated silence for women. In her essay, "Nets and Bridles: Early Modern Conduct Books," Ann Rosalind Jones argues that "the most widely disseminated female ideal was the confinement of the bourgeois daughter and wife to private domesticity in the households of city merchants and professional men....[T]he bourgeois wife was enjoined to silence."[24] Joy Wiltenburg agrees: "The tongue serves as a symbol of potency for the shrew, and the husband's loss of even this outlet reveals his utter castration: she has usurped all his power and reversed the sexual order."[25]

Lady Capulet's derogation of her husband's authority would have been seen as ultimately his fault, not hers. He has not exercised the proper and necessary control over her. Such a position is often advocated in the both English and Italian conduct literature. In Shakespeare's home country, one of the best known pieces of conduct literature was *A godlie form of householde government.*[26] This conduct manual "conceives of the family as a social unit bound together by a hierarchically structured system of reciprocal duties, under the undisputed control of the master and husband. It singles out the family among all social formations as the institution mainly responsible for ensuring religious and moral instruction and for regulating personal conduct."[27]

Another text that took a similar position was the Englishman Edmund Tilney's discourse *The Flowers of Friendship.* Tilney frequently warns that a man's authority can unravel if he does not exercise good control and constant vigilance. For example, one portion of this text revolves around two men, one younger and one older, discussing the proper conduct of a family. During his lecture, the elder warns, "For it is a certain rule that if a woman will not be still with one worde of hir husband, she will not be quiet with as manye wordes, as ever the wise men did write."[28] Similarly, Richard Snawsel's *A Looking Glasse for Maried Folks* demonstrates the necessity for men to rule women. In his conduct book, however, Snawsel uses a different conceit. He has a female character named Abigail gently remind men of the need for women to be kept in check. She says, "Wee are but women, and therefore somewhat bashfull, as it beseemes us, to speak unto you, being a man…yet, under leave and correction, we will do our good will to declare those things which we have learned."[29]

The position and responsibilities of men in family life was no different in Italy. Matteo Palmieri, author of several popular conduct books, equates family governance to governing a city, "with the father as magistrate."[30] Most of these opinions about the place of women in the world were a part of the thinking of audiences of Shakespeare's time. Rudolph Bell is adamant on this point. He insists that "renaissance people accepted that fathers should rule. Even treatises written by women that argue most persuasively for equality of the sexes do not go on to challenge societal norms about family governance."[31] Knowing the prevalent views on women's speech during the Renaissance, it seems likely that Lady Capulet's sarcastic remarks to her husband would have made warning bells sound in the ears of the audience. They would have felt very uncomfortable knowing that such a woman held the reins. Surely, some began squirming in their seats as they quickly realized that the supposed lord in this play was not living up to expectations.

The audience's comfort level with Lord and Lady Capulet could only go down if they were in any way measuring the behavior of the characters by what the conduct books mandated. The second scene of act one finds the Capulet household in heedless disregard of conduct warnings. A party is going to be held, complete with dancing and drinking, rude behavior and coarse talk. Some conduct authors were more restrictive than others about such indulgences. The popular tract *La pazzia del balla* (*The Insanity of Dancing*) by Simon Zuccolo warns that "dancing is akin to full-scale riot….[Women] behave just like the public prostitutes who entice clients with bittersweet tastes and touches here and there. All the while their husbands look on and allow this to continue, their horn of jealousy drowned in wine. With great pomp and vainglory these husbands lead their wives and daughters to the ball."[32] Edmund Tilney also has a good deal to say about the pitfalls of merry-making: "For dronkennesse, whiche commonly haunteth the riotous persons, besides that it wasteth thy thrifte, consumeth thy friends, and corrupteth thy body, doth also turn a reasonable creature into a brute beast."[33] Later, Lord Capulet will prove the wisdom of this advice. His remarks at the ball are boisterous and probably drunken. He bellows to the assembled throng, "Welcome gentlemen, ladies that have their toes / Unplagued with corns will walk about with you. / Ah my mistresses, which of you all / Will deny to dance? She that makes dainty, / She I'll swear has corns" (1.5.16-20).

Lord Capulet most likely thinks he is simply being merry, but this certainly is improper speech for mixed company. Such behavior further undermines his perceived capacity to lead. The extremely popular Italian conduct book author Dr. Michele Savonarola echoes the sentiments of both Italian and English conduct writers when he chastises, "You fathers and mothers of devilish and wicked habits, how can you expect to raise your children properly? Leaving such a bad, vituperative heredity is going to be your downfall. Let it be your own moderation that beats, punishes, and warns your children."[34] Matteo Palmieri also weighs in on the role of fathers in public life. He writes, "How awful to talk and joke about our own vices in front of our children, to go about gluttonous encounters with your friends, and to sing lascivious love songs and tell off-color stories. The cautious father should be talking about good, honest things."[35]

Ignorance is probably not a valid excuse for the Capulets. There is evidence from their actions and words that they are aware of at least some of the codes of conduct. This is proven the first time we see Lord Capulet speaking directly about his daughter. In the second scene of act one, Capulet, discussing the marriage he is arranging between his daughter and her potential groom, remarks, somewhat sadly, that "my child is yet a stranger in the world, / She hath not seen the change of fourteen years" (1.2.7-8). Setting Juliet's age at precisely fourteen shows that Shakespeare, and by extension Lord Capulet, was most likely familiar with the writings of Matteo Palmieri, who divided the life cycle into six stages, the third stage being adolescence, "which begins with the termination of childhood, at the age of discretion, and ends at age twenty-eight."[36] "Counting backwards," surmises Rudolph Bell, "the reasonable age for discretion in this scheme would be fourteen, which would produce symmetrical spans of fourteen, twenty-eight, and fourteen between the age breaks from adolescence to virility, virility to old age, and old age to decrepitude."[37] Juliet is fourteen, and her father is quick to take advantage of this earliest of opportunities to marry her off to a good match.

Although the age of fourteen is the *general* guideline which marks the age of discretion, what Lord Capulet has failed to take into account is the very important distinction that the age of discretion is not a fixed age, unlike the physical onset of puberty.

Palmieri's extensive writing on the subject argues that the "age of discretion" is "a process of moral and spiritual formation that takes place over many years, and is accompanied by intellectual and physical growth and starts at different ages for different individuals, and proceeds at varying rates."[38]

To cross over from childhood to this new stage at such an early age would have required remarkable parenting, something Juliet clearly was not the beneficiary of. As Dr. Savonarola says, "the parental role is critical in providing nutritious soil for the growing seed they have planted on this earth."[39] A major failing of both Lord and Lady Capulet, if one were to ask the authors of the conduct literature, resulted in their decision to hire and retain a wet-nurse for the infant Juliet. The audience learns in scene 3 of act one that the Capulets have employed a nurse for Juliet her entire life, beyond her nursing years and plan to retain her well into the foreseeable future, evidenced here as she croons to Juliet, "God mark me to his grace, / Thou wast the prettiest babe that e'er I nurs'd. / And I might live to see thee married once, / I have my wish" (1.3.59-62).

It might come as something of a surprise to learn that wet-nursing was definitely a hot-button issue in both Renaissance England and Italy. We tend to think that wet-nursing in the Renaissance was accepted by everyone, but this is not so. "Mom should do it," insists Rudolph Bell, "is what all the popular sixteenth-century books recommend, even though it seems that no amount of insistence and argument eliminated the widespread practice."[40]

By having the Capulets in Italy retain a wet-nurse of questionable character, Shakespeare was playing with the idea of the practice in England. Audience members were, for the most part, acutely aware of the debate. One key aspect of the argument centered on the perceived shirking of duty and neglecting of the child due to the selfishness of elite women. It seems that many upper class women were claiming that their "delicate constitutions" would not allow them to breast-feed their own infants. Conduct writers thought, for the most part, that this excuse was pure hogwash. Friar Girolamo Mercurio was a leading proponent of mothers' nursing their own children. His conduct manual *La commare* (*The Midwife*) was published in Venice, in vernacular Italian, for the first time in 1596.[41] It was a shocking text, one that explained the heretofore secrets of women's bodies and the birthing process in language the common person could understand, and was made even more shocking and titillating because it was written by a

Dominican friar.[42] In regard to the hiring of wet-nurses by upper class women, Friar Mercurio made his position very clear. He rails, "The newborn is nourished in his mother's womb for nine months, suddenly is banished from the house, like some traitor or rebel. Such behavior is more inhumane than that of the fiercest tiger, who at least feeds her own young. Not only tigers, but crocodiles, bears, and asps nurse their young!"[43] It would not be surprising at all if Shakespeare knew of this work and that his audience had at least heard about the controversy.

Another conduct writer who expressed strong feelings against the hiring of wet-nurses was Leon Battista Alberti. His infamous works *I Libri Della Famiglia (The Books on Family)*, were popular and well-known conduct manuals that catered more to the upper class. These works were first published in 1443 to great success and continued to be influential and repeatedly used by scholars in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[44] It is reasonable to assume that Shakespeare would have been familiar with such influential texts.

Like Friar Mercurio, Alberti comes down hard on elite women who excuse themselves from nursing. He writes, "I should not take on myself the trouble of finding any other nurse for them other than their own mother. . . . Perhaps these doctors nowadays will assert that giving the breast weakens the mother and makes her sterile for a time. But I find it easier to believe that nature has made adequate provisions for all. . . . I would not (employ a wet-nurse) to give a lady more leisure or to relieve her of that duty she owes to her children."[45] Not all conduct authors were quite so restrictive. Elite women and their husbands might have found some compromise in Dr. Michele Savronola's advice. He suggests that "if you are rich and can afford a servant, nurse yourself but bring in a woman to help with the tiring aspects of baby care."[46]

Audiences attending *Romeo and Juliet* would have been aware of controversies that went deeper into the reasons why mother should nurse her own children. The real problem with wet-nursing arose from the concern for the welfare of a child. Most conduct authors agreed that using a wet-nurse deprived the infant of the more esoteric nutrients needed for a successful life. What was at stake here was the child's entire future.

When thinking about the issues surrounding mother's milk, one must take into consideration the ideas Renaissance people held about the substance itself. They believed that menstrual blood was converted into milk.[47] Moreover, they believed that personality traits were passed on through the person who nurses the child.[48]

Therefore, it follows, as Lorenzo Gioberti asserts in *De gli errori popolari*, "that maternal milk affects the child positively, whereas nourishment from a stranger is not as good."[49] Therefore, the nurse's chastisement to Juliet, "Were not I thine only nurse / I would say thou hadst suck'd wisdom from thy teat," would have carried a double meaning for those in attendance at this play (1.3.68-68). Yes, a young girl has not the wisdom of her elders and cannot rely on her own judgment, just as the nurse admonishes. But because of the debate about mother's milk, playgoers probably also thought that the ignorance of the nurse was a character trait passed on to the girl. This legacy will contribute to the tragedy.

Gioberti also reminds his readers that "nursing creates a special bond between mother and child. If the infant is sent to a wet-nurse, then the appropriate maternal bond does not develop and the child instead becomes attached to its nurse."[50] How true these words are in the case of *Romeo and Juliet*! While Juliet is respectful of her mother, her true affection obviously lies with the nurse. It is the nurse, not Lady Capulet, who showers the young girl with pet words like "lamb," "ladybird," "love," and "sweetheart," and it is the nurse to whom Juliet turns to be the go-between in her illicit affair with Romeo.

Juliet's mother is not the only parent responsible for the influence of the nurse in Juliet's life. Men were exclusively responsible for hiring wet-nurses for their children. In choosing Juliet's nurse, Capulet has made a poor choice. Though loving, she is crude and crass, often bawdy, and above all, disobedient. It was bad enough for Capulet to entrust the malleable personality of his infant to a person of questionable character, but to allow her to remain in the household as a continual influence would have been unconscionable to authors of conduct literature. If one looks at the conduct books geared toward the proper education of young women, one is likely to find advice similar to that found in Giovanni Michele Bruto's *The Necessarie, Fit, and Conveneinet Education of a Yong Gentlewoman*, which was published in English in 1598.[51] Here, Bruto advises, "It is better for fathers to find a wise matron…a girl's mind is very delicate and must not be made yet more feeble and effeminate by being exposed to things that make her forget her good reputation."[52]

The audience sees time and again that the nurse is far from a moral or educated influence on her charge. She continually uses sexual double entendres, such as, "Nay, less bigger. Women grow by men," punning on intercourse and resulting pregnancy. She is familiar with street slang, such as "flirt-gills" meaning "loose women," and "skains-mates" meaning "cut-throat companions" (1.3.95; 2.4.150-51n). However, the audience does see these crass attributes juxtaposed against the nurse's obvious love for the girl. She undoubtedly cares for the child with a real mother's love. For instance, she warns Romeo to take care of the girl. Her pain in releasing Juliet to him is evident. She implores him, "Pray you sir, a word—and as I told you, my young lady bid me enquire you out. What she bid me say, I will keep to myself. But first let me tell ye, if ye should lead her into a fool's paradise, as they say, it were a very gross kind of behaviour, as they say; for the gentlewoman is young. And therefore, if you should deal double with her, truly it were an ill thing to be offered to any gentlewoman, and a very weak dealing" (2.4.159-67). Is love enough? Perhaps at this point of the play, audiences were wrestling with this very idea, in all of its various manifestations. Perhaps somewhere in their minds they were hearing the warnings of the conduct writers such as Edmund Tilney's advice to fathers: "Be carefull in the education of (your) children," he warns. "For much better were they unborne, than untaught."[53]

Juliet has essentially no adult to turn to for sound advice in the play. Her father has already proven himself rash, her mother distant, and her nurse loving but incompetent. The only other adult she can turn to is the friar. He is the principle adult who could have steered the young couple in a proper direction. At first, the friar seems like someone who should be trusted. He tries to warn Romeo of the temporary state of infatuation: "These violent states have violent ends / And in their triumph die, like fire and powder, / Which as they kiss consume… / Therefore love moderately; long love doth so. / Too swift arrives as tardy too slow" (2.6.9-11, 14-15). But his words carry no weight, because his actions undermine them. He marries the couple anyway, despite the fact that he knows he is violating parental wishes, as well as wedding two people who have continually demonstrated to him a blatant disregard of reason. Dr. Michele Savonarola warns people to "find a competent confessor with whom the child can develop a harmonious relationship."[54] Friar Laurence would not have measured up.

Of course, the friar's final misdeed comes when he gives Juliet the vial that will make her appear to be dead. The vial itself is suspicious. Given the stories circulating during the Renaissance in chapbooks, tracts, and other conduct media about the evils of Catholicism in general and priests in particular, this mysterious, unexplained substance feels occult-ish. Even if one could somehow dismiss this uncomfortable element, it is impossible to ignore the fact that Friar Laurence has been instrumental in bringing the crisis to boil. One perhaps could argue that the friar was making a desperate bid to save her life, because Juliet was threatening to commit suicide. Unlike Juliet's nurse, however, the friar should have been grounded in morality and used his educated mind to reason with her instead of adopting such an untenable scheme.

Renaissance audiences familiar with conduct books and church teachings would also have been very troubled by just how little the friar seems to value the worth of both Romeo's and Juliet's souls. The regard for an individual's soul was a major tenet in the Reformation's doctrine.[55] Friar Laurence undeniably aids them in sin. Whether one agreed with arranged marriage or not, the friar is the one who agrees to clandestinely marry the pair and dishonor the father, which consequently results in Juliet being put in danger of being a bigamist. He resorts to what amounts to magic to "help" them further, but worst of all, when everything comes crashing down, it is his own neck he seeks to save, not Juliet's. Though he makes something of an attempt to rescue her, too, it is himself he is most concerned about. "Come, I'll dispose of thee / Among a sisterhood of holy nuns," he implores. "Stay not to question, for the Watch is coming. / Come, go, good Juliet. I dare no longer stay" (5.3.156-60). The "Watch" he should be concerned with is the eternal Heavenly Watch, not the earthly, temporal one.

No rational adult mind is ever able to give competent advice to either Juliet or Romeo. Up until this point, the discussion here has largely centered on the character of Juliet. We are not given much background on Romeo's life growing up, but it seems safe to assume that he was reared in a similar fashion to that of his child-bride. The families are obviously set up by Shakespeare as being more-or-less comparable. Both are elite. Each family has equal control of the city. Each family has an only child. Like Juliet, Romeo relies on his own immature reasoning. When these two meet, little but disaster could follow.

When Romeo appears on the stage, he is lamenting over the lost love of Rosaline. His language of grief over the woman is flowery and romantic: "Love is a smoke made with the fume of sighs; / Being purg'd, a fire sparkling in lovers' eyes; / Being vex'd, a sea nourish'd with lovers' tears; / What is it else? A madness most discreet, / A choking gall, and a preserving sweet" (1.1.188-92). Romeo does not heed the advice of his wiser, more mature friend Mercutio, who advises him to forget about Rosaline and urges him to give "liberty unto thine eyes; / Examine other beauties" (1.1.225-26). Romeo continues for some time in his mooning misery, complaining love is "too rough, / Too rude, too boisterous, and it pricks like thorn" and that "The game was ne'er so fair, and I am done" (1.4.26-27, 39).

Mercutio, however, continues to equate love with myth, telling Romeo that "Queen Mab" has cast a spell over him. In this myth, explains Brian Gibbons, Queen Mab is the "person among the fairies whose department it was to deliver the families of sleeping men of their dreams, those *children of an idle brain*."[56] Romeo's dreaminess is contrasted with Mercutio's reason on purpose. If one approaches this play thinking about the ideology of the time, one is able to see the ridiculousness of his infatuation. This sort of ungrounded fancy is warned against time and again by conduct writers such as Alberti, who cautions, "Young men especially lack the inner strength or power to restrain themselves by thought and consideration. They have not enough maturity to resist their instant and distracting natural appetites."[57]

How true this is as we see Romeo's broken heart over Rosaline instantly repair upon meeting Juliet! His language is every bit as flowery at the excitement of his new love as it was for the loss of his old flame. He gushes, "O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright. / It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night / As a rich jewel in a Ethiop's ear— / Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear… / Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight. / For I ne'er saw true beauty til this night" (1.5. 43-46, 51-52). It seems that Shakespeare might once again be thinking of Alberti's words as he propels Romeo from one state of infatuation to another. Alberti writes, "Animals, driven by nature, can in no way restrain themselves. Then no more can men? Certainly not those who have no more reason and judgment than animals…. [By reason] he feels and distinguishes what things are honorable. By means of this he follows rationality after praiseworthy ends and seeks to avoid all causes of shame."[58]

Romeo is guilty of all the transgressions of reason that Alberti warns against. He follows his animal appetites instantly and refuses the counsel of friends who urge him to look at things in a rational way. Romeo decides to completely disregard every rule of his patriarchal social system. Obviously, he disrespects Juliet's family by going behind the father's back and marrying his daughter, and one wonders just what kind of a life the couple could have had if their plot had succeeded. Certainly, no dowry would be given to Juliet, and Romeo could surely expect to be disinherited. The pair had broken all the rules that would have given them respectability and social status in a society obsessed by order. How could the young couple survive? They would soon discover that love is a thin broth for a hungry stomach. The point is that he does not look into the future, even as the situation becomes more and more dire. As Alberti says, "Enamored men act not under the guidance of reason but always in the spirit of madness."[59] It is not in the least surprising that Romeo allows his heart, not his head, to guide his hand as he brings the poisonous vial to his lips and ends his life.

Juliet also proves herself to be in complete disregard of reason and blind to future consequences. As has been shown, her upbringing completely failed to provide her examples of rational behavior. Therefore, when lust comes to her door (and her balcony) she is unarmed for the battle between fancy and reason. Without having been courted at all, and purely on the flames of infatuation, Juliet pleads (in solitude, although hoping it will be true) in these famous lines, "O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo? / Deny thy father and refuse thy name. / Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn to my love / And I'll no longer be a Capulet" (2.2. 33-36).

Tilney's writings may have been reeling in the minds of the theatre patrons as Juliet uttered her infamous words. The Lady Julia, spokeswoman for Tilney's agenda, warns women that "the venom of love blindeth the eyes and so bewitcheth the senses of us poore women, that as we can foresee nothing, so are we perswaded that all the vices of the beloved are rare, and excellent vertues, and the thing most sower, to be verie sweete, and delicate."[60] Juliet is like her Romeo in her romantic delusions. She would have done well to heed Lady Julia's words, just as Romeo would have benefited from his bosom friend's sound counsel.

"You may say, perhaps, that love can only do as much and seize as such power as we ourselves concede," cautions Leon Battista Alberti.[61] Romeo and Juliet, because they refuse or are unable to reason, concede their lives. As modern readers, we tend to view this play as the ultimate thwarted romance. Would Renaissance patrons have thought the same? It is true that the debate between individual choice and parental selection was churning. But as the audience listened to Juliet's last words, then watched in horror as she plunged a dagger into her heart, then had their horror compounded as they witnessed Romeo's suicide, one wonders if the admonitions from the conduct writers might have been more than prevalent in their minds than concern for the whims of young lovers. Did they really want things to go this far?

Notes

1. Joy Wiltenburg, *Disorderly Women and Female Power in the Street Literature of Early Modern England and Germany* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 29.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 30.

4. Philip Stubbes, *A christal glass for Christian Women* in *Conduct Literature for Women 1500-1640*, eds. William St. Clair and Irmgard Maassen, vol. 3 (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2000), 1-2.

5. Ann Rosalind Jones, "Nets and Bridles: Early Modern Conduct Books and Sixteenth-century Women's Lyrics, in *The Ideology of Conduct: Essays on Literature and the History of Sexuality*, eds. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse. (New York: Methuen, Inc., 1987), 41.

6. Cited in Wiltenburg, "*Disorderly Women*," 41.

7. Cited in Wiltenburg, "*Disorderly Women*," 237.

8. Cited in Wiltenburg, "*Disorderly Women.*"33. David Cressy estimates that approximately thirty percent of the English population, mostly men, (although an increasing number of women) were literate in the late sixteenth century.

9. Valerie Wayne, introduction to "Rupture in the Arbor" in *The Flowers of Friendship*, by Edward Tilney (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 93.

10. Wayne, introduction to "Ideologies of Companionate Marriage" in *The Flowers of Friendship*, 2.

11. Rudolph Bell, *How to Do It: Guides to Good Living for Renaissance Italians* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 227.

12. Ibid.

13. Wayne, introduction to "Ideologies," 6.

14. Ibid., 13.

15. Anthony Fletcher. *Gender, Sex & Subordination in England 1500-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 60.

16. Quoted in Bell, *How To Do It*, 227.

17. Katherine Usher Henderson and Barbara McManus, *Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts about Women in England 1540-1640* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 78.

18. Quoted in Henderson and McManus, *Half Humankind*, 78.

19. Cited in Fletcher, *Gender, Sex & Subordination*, 4.

20. Brian Gibbons, ed., *Romeo and Juliet*, by William Shakespeare, The Arden Shakespeare (Surrey: Thomas Nelson & Sons. Ltd., 1997), 85, 72n. Gibbons uses these words to characterize Lord Capulet. Act, scene and line numbers refer to this edition.

21. Wiltenburg, *Disorderly Women*, 260.

22. Ibid, 261.

23. Ibid, 119.

24. Jones, "Nets and Bridles," 40.

25. Wiltenburg, *Disorderly Women*, 155.

26. Cited in William St. Clair and Irmgard Maassen, ed., *Conduct Literature for Women 1500-1640*, vol.3 (London: Picering & Chatto, 2000), 25.

27. St. Clair and Maassen, introduction to *Dod/Cleaver: Householde Government* in *Conduct Literature for Women*, 28.

28. Edward Tilney, *Flowers of Friendship*, ed. Valerie Wayne (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 123.

29. Quoted in Jones "Nets and Bridles," 60.

30. Quoted in Bell, *How To Do It*, 163.

31. Bell, *How To Do It*, 221-22.

32. Quoted in Bell, *How To Do It*, 188.

33. Tilney, *Flowers of Friendship*, 115.

34. Quoted in Bell, H*ow To Do It*, 168.

35. Quoted in Bell, H*ow To Do It*, 160.

36. Ibid., 177.

37. Bell, H*ow To Do It*, 177.

38. Quoted in Bell, *How To Do It,* 178.

39. Quoted in Bell, *How To Do It,* 159.

40. Bell, *How To Do It,* 125.

41. Quoted in Bell, *How To Do It,* 14.

42. Bell, *How To Do It,* 14.

43. Quoted in Bell, *How To Do It,* 127.

44. Renee Neu Watkins, introduction to *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, by Leon Battista Alberti (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1969), 2.

45. Leon Battista Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, trans. Renee Neu Watkins (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1969), 53.

46. Quoted in Bell, *How To Do It,* 128.

47. Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England 1550-1720* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 29.

48. Bell, How To Do It, 126.

49. Quoted in Bell *How To Do It,* 126.

50. Ibid.

51. Cited in Bell, *How To Do It,* 184, 336 n16.

52. Quoted in Bell, *How To Do It,* 184.

53. Tilney, *Flowers of Friendship*, 123.

54. Quoted in Bell, *How To Do It,* 159.

55. Wiltenburg, *Disorderly Women,* 263.

56. Gibbons, ed., *Romeo and Juliet*, 109 n54. Gibbons's emphasis.

57. Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, 96.

58. Ibid, 102.

59. Ibid, 103.

60. Tilney, *Flowers of Friendship*, 128.

61. Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, 103.