Making Romeo a Man: Violence, Sexual Conquest, and the Promise of Marital Promiscuity[1]

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Readers and critics of Shakespeare's work make much of his take on women's virginity, and for good reason given the historical anxiety that surrounded the subject.[2] The regulation of women's bodies was a deeply ingrained practice tied to a social and political hierarchy based on primogeniture and heredity, and so the subject garners attention. *Romeo and Juliet* and responses to it, of course, figure prominently in the discussion of virginity in Shakespeare's plays, because the play presents a pubescent Juliet as a precious commodity and provides examples of the strict physical and social boundaries that contained women and girls' lives.[3] She is a young woman whose actions and choices are highly policed by her parents, especially her father, who severely restricts her actions. Despite these circumstances, Juliet's sexuality is sometimes characterized as remarkably mature by audiences and scholars because it is a humanized portrayal of a young woman as a sexual being. This often surprises young adult students who come to the play believing it to be a pure love story that relates the innocence of its titular characters. Significantly less attention has been paid to men's virginity in either early modern plays or the critical responses

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they have garnered. However, *Romeo and Juliet* does have things to say on this understudied subject. As the play progresses, Romeo's status as a man hinges on his and Juliet's virginity in more ways than one.

Reading Romeo's and other adolescent male characters' attitudes toward virginity and male sexuality can help us understand the cultural and historical attitude toward promiscuity as a marker of manhood. By extension, Romeo's sexual ideas about himself and his bride demonstrate confused ideas about marriage and its role as a marker of mature manhood. As Ann Jennalie Cook points out, "Full adulthood for both men and women came only with marriage. . . before wedding, individuals were lesser citizens; afterward, they were incorporated into society at a more responsible level."[4] The play makes much of marriage as a rite of passage, and a characteristic early modern anxiety about love and lust in godly union between man and wife exists in the play. Rather than presenting male promiscuity in opposition to marriage, this paper considers how Romeo and Juliet's courtship and eventual marriage offer the young man a way into the sexual world idealized by his young male friends and counterparts. As he seeks to discard his virginity, Juliet shows him that sexual desire is an integral part of a newly emerging idea of marriage rather than an oppositional force within it. In this way, the play presents marriage as a vehicle for the fulfillment of male adolescent sexual fantasies.

The play introduces a youthful vision of male sexuality early on. After the play's famous prologue, it opens on Capulet servingmen Sampson and Gregory ribbing each other with erotic puns that equate sexual conquest with the household feud that drives the play's action. Through their language choices, a rakish, if somewhat naïve, approach to women and their maidenhoods emerges. The boys tease each other about their ability to "stand" and brandish their "naked weapons" (1.1.10, 12, 29, 35).[5] They also plan to "thrust" themselves upon the "heads" of the Montague women (1.1.19, 24-6). When Sampson threatens women—"the weaker vessels"—with this sexual violence, the moment shows the ruthlessness that has been ingrained in the young men involved in this "ancient grudge" (1.1.16-17, Prologue.3). The violence of the conflict extends to their attitudes toward sex: they assault women with "weapons" and "cut off" their "heads" (1.1.34, 24-6). Violence

and sex—particularly violence and virginity—are conflated here, and the young men express a lack of respect for the chastity of their enemies' women. However, Gregory, in a moment that shows a smidgen of mature empathy, reminds Sampson that, "The quarrel is between our masters and us their men," and thus excludes the women. "'Tis all one," (1.1.8-21), Sampson retorts, re-implicating women in the Capulet/Montague feud, but importantly also calling attention to his own boyish status: he would have been "all one" himself. The character/actor is both boy and woman on the early modern stage, a position that reflects adolescents' liminal status in early modern society.

This exchange between these young men provides a glimpse into the nebulous space occupied by young men in feud-riddled Verona and early modern England, a social position that is both empowering and isolating. They lived by different rules of their own making. In her important work on early modern childhood, Kate Chedgzoy claims, "For boys… adolescence was not so much a chronological, developmental stage, as a socially produced time of temporary destabilization of the normal structures of dependence and autonomy that regulate the lives of children and adults."[6] In the play and in early modern England, the in-between state of the adolescent sometimes offered young men a freeing but unregulated social space. Amidst the love speech of *Romeo and Juliet,* there is to be found a picture of violent male adolescent privilege made possible by the liminality of adolescence. Young men attend parties they are not invited to, openly defy the Prince's policies, and assume women are theirs for the taking.

This sense of entitlement extends to occupying space and using it to serve their own ends. The young men in the play hold the public spaces of Verona captive by creating violence in the streets, which is emphasized from the play's beginning. Sexual teasing and the comedic nature of the opening scene discussed above quickly give way to a brawl motivated by young machismo and the infamous feud. The conflation of sex and violence highlights their common motivations: rather than impressing women or their elders with these pursuits, they are out to impress each other. Fighting and pursuing women make them men in each other's eyes partly because they contribute to a sense of group identity. Men cannot rule the city as individuals—as evidenced by the futile

efforts of the Prince to keep the peace—but instead form gangs in order to wield influence and effect change. Romeo's state of grief over Rosaline at the beginning of the play makes him an outsider, a potential liability in their quest. As Benvolio advises, Romeo should "Be ruled by [him]" and his other friends (1.1.233). The idealized courtly love and monogamous sex that Romeo seems to desire with Rosaline hardly seem to be valued amongst this boisterous and rowdy group of young men. A desire to follow suit and be reintegrated into the gang could explain Romeo's rash quickness in choosing a new woman to pursue after being rejected.

The opinion of his cronies matters much to Romeo. Their social cachet is persuasive, yet complex because assimilation into their group paradoxically requires distinction as they vie for top status. Romeo endures good-natured teasing about his melancholy state and poetic nature at his friends' hands, which clearly impacts him and his thinking. In particular, the charismatic Mercutio exerts a lot of influence.

Mercutio is an irresistible character inside and outside the world of the play. Audiences—particularly contemporary audiences—have reveled in his humor and impulsiveness.[7] He must be equally interesting to his male companions. His fierce individuality embodies the lawless freedom the young men crave and which they try to create in the streets of Verona. Despite his kinship with the Prince and Paris, he lives by his own rules, declaring: "Men's eyes were made to look, and let them gaze; / I will not budge for no man's pleasure, I" (3.1.54–55). Mercutio's defiance and unconventionality further become evident in his castigation of the conventional. He mocks Tybalt for being an obedient, exemplary courtier (2.4.19-20) and for fighting "by the book of arithmetic" (3.1.102). He speaks in irreverent sexual puns and lewd teases, a characteristic most prominently on display during his interaction with the nurse (2.4). In this scene, he jokes about heterosexual sex with familiarity in lines like, "the bawdy hand of the dial is now upon the prick of noon" (2.4.57-8). Given his familiarity with Romeo and their mutual affection for each other, it stands to reason that his attitudes toward love and sex would influence the lovelorn protagonist. Romeo's infatuation with Rosaline does not fit in with Mercutio's ideal heterosexual pairing that is dominated by a free sexuality, evidenced by Mercutio's relentless teasing. The

young Montague perhaps turns away from the chaste Rosaline to appease his friends and fit into their world. Perhaps Romeo believes that pursuing Juliet (and her virginity) might establish his role within his group of friends, not only because it would allow him to show off sexually, but also because it would incense their enemies the Capulets. For him, sexual conquest and potential promiscuity promise to establish his place among his friends, who currently mock him for being too much in love with love and not active enough in the hate that surrounds the feud.

Contrary to his friends' descriptions, Romeo does not see himself as someone normally affected by heartbreak. He wants to cast off his lovesick reputation and be seen as a man amongst his friends. Grieving the loss of Rosaline, he laments, "Tut, I have lost myself. I am not here. / This is not Romeo. He's some other where" (1.1.205-6). Romeo's affair with the young woman and his reaction to it fundamentally change him in his own eyes. Perhaps this unidentified shift is a move from childhood to adulthood. In the limbo of adolescent angst, he is no longer a boy, but because Rosaline refuses sex, he is also not a man. Romeo emphasizes Rosaline's chastity as an obstacle to his achievement of his true identity as a grown man, and his description of it involves both sex and violence. He explains his thwarted conquest to Benvolio, his other confidant, thus:

Romeo: She'll not be hit
With Cupid's arrow. She hath Dian's wit,
And, in strong proof of chastity well armed,
From love's weak childish bow she lives uncharmed.
She will not stay the siege of loving terms,
Nor bide th' encounter of assailing eyes,
Nor ope her lap to saint-seducing gold.

Benvolio: Then she hath sworn that she will still live chaste?

Romeo: She hath, and in that sparing [makes] huge waste;
…
She hath forsworn to love, and in that vow
Do I live dead, that live to tell it now. (1.1.216-232)

Through a characteristic adolescent melodrama, Romeo equates being sexually rejected—not romantically rejected—with death: he cannot be himself without sex. Like the opening scene, this passage

describes sex acts using violent metaphors. Men attempt to "hit" women with Cupid's arrow, a thinly veiled, immature symbol for the penis. They "assail" women with their gaze. Sex is to be *taken*, yet Romeo fails to take it, putting not only his sexual courage but also his physical bravery into question and making his masculinity vulnerable. Pining for Rosaline with no satisfaction keeps him "Shut up in prison, kept without [his] food" (1.2.58). Benvolio urges him to get over his love by "giving *liberty* to thine eyes" (1.1.235) to find another lady. In other words, successful sexual conquest can be achieved only through freedom and movement to look at other women. The instruction recalls Romeo's assailing eyes that failed to convince Rosaline to turn on her vow of chastity.

Romeo's frustration about Rosaline's chaste vow, and Sampson and Gregory's sexually charged exchange, unleash sexual energy into the play from the opening scene, and much of this energy is focused on dismantling women's chastity. Allusions to female virginity in several other moments of the play similarly characterize it as a joke, a conquest, or an inconvenient obstacle to true connection. Several of these references indicate that virgin women need to be taught to sexually perform and to be appropriately submissive. For example, the Nurse's repeated bawdy joke about a toddler-aged Juliet mentions her learning to "fall backward" to accommodate a man (1.3.42, 56). Mercutio's Queen Mab, "presses [maids] and learns them first to bear, / Making them women of good carriage" (1.4.98-9). Other references suggest that women need to be "ripe" in order to handle sex, as Capulet comments to Paris at the beginning of the play (1.2.11). In other words, it falls to a man to judge women's ability—not willingness—to please him and teach women how to perform.

For young men, the loss of virginity is a road to the "liberty" and sexual wisdom that comes with being a grownup, but for women, its loss is just another way to acquiesce to men's superiority and remain subordinate. These fates are wrapped up with religious and cultural ideas of marriage. Juliet's vows of love reflect an understanding of this. She says, "All my fortunes at thy foot I lay / And follow thee my lord throughout the world" (2.2.154-155). In their courting exchanges, she expresses a willingness to sleep with him if he promises to marry her and take her away from her controlling parents, seeking to thwart their plan to marry her off

to Paris. She believes that inviting him to take her virginity permits her to become more her own woman outside of their control. Sex is her ticket out, but the ride is short. In their tragic love story, sexual relationships are not sustainable. Once their marriage is consummated, banishment forces the lovers apart. As Stanley Wells claims, the play, "begins with sex without love, and it is to continue with love without sex."[8] A significant tragic element of *Romeo and Juliet* is that their marriage can never be successful because (good) sex and love have little chance to coexist within an antiquated notion of marriage as an exchange chiefly in service of God and family.

Prior to the banishment, characters are impatient about sex, but this is replaced by impatience for union upon Romeo's unwilling exit from Verona. The expression of adult sexuality seems urgent to both lovers as a general tenor of impatience pervades this play. Ben Wiebracht has noticed such restlessness in the play, "Never have swords sat more restlessly in their scabbards than they do in *Romeo and Juliet.* Impatience is the cause of every misery in the play, from the deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt, to the rash challenge of Paris, to the premature suicide of Romeo."[9] But Wiebracht ignores the impatience that characterizes the lovers' interactions. Veronese men's literal *and* metaphorical swords are restless, including Romeo's. Juliet eagerly encourages Romeo to rescue her via marriage by playing on his desires, not only for sexual satisfaction, but also for a promotion into manhood. She works him into a frenzy to the point of begging, and then cleverly turns his sexual desire to a desire to marry. The play complicates sexual impatience with lovesick intemperance, another sign, in the eyes of the early moderns, of inexperience.[10] To be a "proper man" was to be levelheaded and civic-minded; there was little room for passionate love or sex in this ideal. Wiebracht claims, "In the Renaissance, serious love was inherently intense, inherently passionate, and inherently opposed to those domains in which the 'proper man' excelled. . . To truly love was to abandon all other duties and pursuits, and to glory in the sacrifice."[11] Juliet solves this dilemma by turning Romeo's lovesickness first into sexual desire and then into marital intentions.

Juliet begins her quest to get Romeo on her matrimonial page by evocatively pointing out her own passion and its immoderate

strength. She tells him she fears he will "think [her] havior light" and that she "should have been more strange" (2.2.104, 107). She elicits Romeo's impassioned response by denying to confess her love because it is "too rash, too ill-advised, too sudden" (2.2.125), yet she describes it using sexually suggestive language, calling attention to her "blush" and the "mask of night" (2.2.91, 90). Perhaps most suggestively, she implies that the next time they meet, her "beauteous flower" may have "ripened" (2.2.129-130), recalling her own father's reference to her sexual maturation. In response to this, Romeo groans with desire:

> *Romeo:* Wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied?
> *Juliet:* What satisfaction canst thou have tonight?
> *Romeo:* Th' exchange of thy love's faithful vow for mine.
> *Juliet:* I gave thee mine before thou didst request it
> And yet I would it were to give again. (2.2.132-5)

This exchange implies sexual satisfaction pretty clearly, but it also conflates the taking of Juliet's virginity with the vow of marriage. Her desire to be able to give her vow highlights the preciousness of her innocent but tantalizing sexual state. In short, by insinuating a promise of sex and an opportunity to give her virginity to Romeo, she tempts him to marriage with what is essentially a proposal. She instructs him, "If that thy bent of love be honourable / Thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow" (2.2.150-1), but she gives him no opportunity to actually reply to her suggestion of marriage. Juliet makes it so Romeo's sexual satisfaction via loss of his own virginity (and therefore his reputation among his friends) depends on their proper union in marriage.

Though Romeo may have to be subtly convinced of the importance of marriage, Juliet needs little instruction about the importance of sex. Despite Wells's claim that the bawdy disappears from the play upon Mercutio's death,[12] Juliet delivers some rather randy lines in the scene that directly follows the deadly fight and Romeo's banishment. Shakespeare provides this young character, barely old enough to be a woman, an almost scandalous understanding of not only her lover's sexual desire, but her own. After their secret marriage, she openly yearns for its consummation. Her own sexual impatience becomes apparent in the soliloquy she delivers as she waits for Romeo to come to her bedchamber, which mimics the language she uses to appeal to Romeo's desire. She says,

> Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds,
> Towards Phoebus' lodging: such a wagoner
> As Phaethon would whip you to the west,
> And bring in cloudy night immediately.
> Spread thy close curtain, love-performing night,
> That runaway's eyes may wink and Romeo
> Leap to these arms, untalk'd of and unseen.
> Lovers can see to do their amorous rites
> By their own beauties; or, if love be blind,
> It best agrees with night. Come, civil night,
> Thou sober-suited matron, all in black,
> And learn me how to lose a winning match,
> Play'd for a pair of stainless maidenhoods:
> Hood my unmann'd blood, bating in my cheeks,
> With thy black mantle; till strange love, grown bold,
> Think true love acted simple modesty.
> Come, night; come, Romeo. . .
> . . .
> O, I have bought the mansion of a love,
> But not possess'd it, and, though I am sold,
> Not yet enjoy'd: so tedious is this day
> As is the night before some festival
> To an impatient child that hath new robes
> And may not wear them. (3.2.1-34)

Here, alone on stage, she is much more straightforward about her desire than she is in her sexually suggestive exchange with Romeo because she no longer needs the cloak of modesty to woo her proper man. Recalling her wooing words to Romeo, she again plays on the notion that "love-performing night" is the time for lusty pastimes, and hastens its arrival. She recalls her (and Romeo's) virginity with a "bating" in her cheeks. Sure of her matrimonial bargain, the "mansion" she has purchased, she is impatient for it to be "enjoyed." The simile she uses at the end of this passage, that of the impatient child, emphasizes the idea that having married, the lovers achieved only part of their passage into adulthood. The rest of it will come once their "stainless maidenheads" have been lost in the winning game of sexual enjoyment.

Juliet teaches Romeo that not only sex but that marriage will allow him be seen as a man by his compatriots by proposing a newly emerging model of marriage that could accommodate their love. In the seventeenth century, Protestantism viewed sexual desire

within marriage as sinless. The concept that sex was companionate to a godly type of marriage allowed desire and chaste matrimony to live in consort. This made way for a monogamous marital ideal to emerge while restricting extra-marital relationships in a way that they had not been restricted before. Essentially, the Protestant vision of marriage ushered in the idea that sex between spouses should be pleasurable, therefore limiting the desire to seek satisfaction elsewhere. Philip Mirabelli identifies this new ideal in the play: "in *Romeo and Juliet* and early comedies, Shakespeare fused emerging marital discourse with erotic, mostly adulterous older ones, an ideal we can call *romantic* marriage, which only eventually exerted great social influence."[13] For Mirabelli, *Romeo and Juliet* provides an early model of marriage that encourages passion between partners, a model that would later become the norm. However, I think *Romeo and Juliet* supports a subversive approach to crystallizing strict notions of marriage and sexuality. Romeo and Juliet's rashness in rushing to the altar may be read as a byproduct of the new, church-backed and socially pervasive idea that sexual desire was an essential and encouraged part of marriage, and thus the play is a critique of the changes imposed on marriage as an institution. Because Romeo tried and was refused extramarital sex with Rosaline, he is quick to desire it of Juliet, and so is rife for her suggestion. With this understanding, we can actually equate the adolescent sexual urges that tie him to an adolescent group identity with an adult desire to marry.

Yet, the married Romeo ultimately chooses to distinguish himself from his friends. After he secretly weds his Juliet, he expresses a desire for peace in the streets of Verona, an attitude that contradicts his cohort's esteem for violence as a measure of manhood, as expressed in the play's opening. Romeo discourages conflict in the street, telling Tybalt he "loves" him, and that he "know'st [him] not" if Tybalt thinks he is a violent villain (3.1.32, 35). Once fighting breaks out, Romeo tries to persuade the others not to engage: "Gentlemen, for shame, forbear this outrage! / Tybalt, Mercutio, the prince expressly hath / Forbidden bandying in Verona streets: / Hold, Tybalt! good Mercutio!" (3.1.52-55). These pleas come mere hours after his secret marriage, but Romeo appears to have experienced a change now that he is a husband; he wants nothing to do with adolescent rituals of masculine prowess.

In petitioning for peace, Romeo shows himself to be a man who has transcended adolescent ideals of manhood. This provides hope for his future with his new bride. Of course, this hope is short-lived, and soon Romeo kills Tybalt in anger. The mature man we glimpse at the beginning of the scene falls back into his adolescent ways, ultimately dooming his marriage and passage into adulthood.

The coinciding deaths of the lovers seem to be an inescapable destiny, and Romeo's fatal blow to the Capulet cousin is, at least in part, what seals that fate. Unlike the lovelorn adolescent of the beginning of the play, the adult Romeo cannot slip between childhood and adulthood as it suits him. The "liberty" that Benvolio tempts him with is gone. Because he has married, or completed the ultimate rite of passage, he is no longer free to move about the streets and between life phases. Juliet's suggestion that he can have his wedding cake and eat it too ultimately proves untenable. In fact, the couple's marriage seems to end adolescence across the city; their deaths prompt the Prince to enforce peace in the streets, restricting the actions and movements of the surviving young men.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2017 Wooden O Symposium at Southern Utah University. The author wishes to thank her fellow presenters and attendees who offered their helpful feedback that led to this revision.

2. The following sources, among others, provide good discussion of virginity in Shakespeare and the early modern period: Mary Bly's *Queer Virgin and Virgin Queens on the Early Modern Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Frances Dolan's *Marriage and Violence: The Early Modern Legacy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Marjorie Garber's *Coming of Age in Shakespeare* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Theodora Jankowski's *Pure Resistance: Queer Virginity in Early Modern English Drama* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Marie Loughlin's *Hymeneutics: Interpreting Virginity on the Early Modern Stage* (Cranbury, NJ: Bucknell University Press, 1997); and Sara Luttfring's *Bodies, Speech and Reproductive Knowledge in Early Modern England* (New York: Routlege, 2016).

3. Specifically, see Ursula Potter's "Navigating the Dangers of Female Puberty in Renaissance Drama," *Studies in English Literature* 53:2 (2013): 421-439.

4. Ann Jennalie Cook, *Making a Match: Courtship in Shakespeare and His Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 8.

5. All quotations from *Romeo and Juliet* are taken from the Folger edition, eds. Barbara A. Mowat, and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2009).

6. Kate Chedgzoy, "Introduction: 'What, are they children?'" in *Shakespeare and Childhood,* eds. Kate Chedgzoy, Susanne Greenhalgh, and Robert Shaughnessy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 24.

7. Many critics have commented on Mercutio's charisma as well as his liminality. See especially Joseph Porter's several works on the character, including *Shakespeare's Mercutio: His History and Drama* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

8. Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare, Sex, and Love* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 151.

9. Ben Wiebracht, "'The Vile Conclusion'. Crises of resolution in Shakespeare's love plots," Shakespeare 12.3 (2016): 246.

10. The characters' impatience plays into the early modern idea that holding on to virginity too long caused a host of problems, particularly sickness and unrest. Ursula Potter posits that the play shows girls' virginity in adolescence causing anxiety about health and familial stability. She argues that fear of conditions like greensickness led to extreme policing of young people's behavior. (See "Navigating the Dangers of Female Puberty in Renaissance Drama," *Studies in English Literature* 53.2 (2013): 421-439). The idea that remaining a virgin too long was cause for concern compellingly contradicts accepted ideas about the extreme protection of girls' virginity.

11. Wiebracht, "The Vile Conclusion," 248-9.

12. Wells Stanley, *Shakespeare, Sex, and Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 164.

13. Philip Mirabelli, "Shakespeare and Sexual Re-formation," *Modern Language Quarterly* 76:1 (2015): 19.