

Homosociality in *Romeo and Juliet*

“O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?” (2.1.74-5) This quote is one of the most recognizable pieces of literature ever written. It is possibly the most well-known quote out of what is likely William Shakespeare’s most recognized work: *Romeo and Juliet*. This fine work is, in a nutshell, a tale of love and tragedy. But there is a lot more to *Romeo and Juliet* than just passion and misfortune. Shakespeare created some of the most complex and clever characters ever produced in literature, and *Romeo and Juliet* is no exception. This play is full of entertaining and complicated characters, with Juliet leading the pack. Despite her youth, Juliet is an extremely witty and intuitive character, and in her relationship with Romeo, she seems to be the one in control. Romeo is so overcome by his desire for Juliet that he is blind to all reason, while Juliet, despite being younger, seems to be the more mature one in the relationship. This dynamic is particularly interesting given the social structure of the time, which was extremely male-dominated and homosocial. Dictionary.com defines homosocial as “relating to or denoting same-sex social relationships.” This term is very fitting for *Romeo and Juliet*, where females like Juliet are seen as pieces of property to be used to assist in male friendships. The way that Romeo and Juliet’s relationship differs from the norm of the time can be seen throughout the entire play, but one of the finest demonstrations of this interesting relationship dynamic occurs during a scene that anyone who took high school English is familiar with: the balcony scene. This famous scene occurs following the two lovers’ fateful first meeting at the Capulet party, where they are struck with classic “love at first sight.” In addition to being one of the best examples of Romeo and Juliet’s atypical relationship, the balcony scene also gives us a good idea of how this relationship plays out in some of the other iconic scenes in this play. In this paper, I will first analyze the way

that the balcony scene demonstrates Romeo and Juliet's relationship and look at representation of this scene on film, specifically in versions by Franco Zeffirelli (1968) and Baz Luhrmann (1996.) I will then look at the way this relationship dynamic and the idea of homosociality play out in some of the play's other important scenes, and provide examples of what this idea of homosociality looks like in some of Shakespeare's other plays.

At the beginning of the balcony scene, Romeo leaves his friends to search for Juliet. This separation in and of itself is a bit of a metaphor for Romeo's behavior during his relationship with Juliet, specifically the way that he ignores his friends' pleas to have fun with them rather than become infatuated with another girl. Romeo sneaks onto the Capulet's property in search of Juliet, who is on her balcony soliloquizing about her feelings for Romeo. In this speech, Juliet philosophizes about identity and what it is to have a name, and it is one of the first times that she seems to have wisdom beyond her young years:

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy. Thou art thyself, though, not a Montague.

What's a Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot, nor arm, nor face, nor any other part belonging to a man. O, be some other name! What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet. So Romeo, would, were he not Romeo called, retain that dear perfection which he owes without that title.

Romeo, doff thy name, and for thy name – which is no part of thee – take all myself. (Shakespeare 2.1.80-91)

After this speech, Romeo makes himself known to Juliet, who is completely shocked to find that someone has been listening to her. What follows is a rather comical display of a love-

struck Romeo making advances and spewing sonnets, only to be turned down wittily by Juliet. This scene has somewhat of a cat-and-mouse feel to it, with Juliet anticipating what Romeo is going to say and telling him what she will say in response, all before he has said anything. The dynamic of this conversation perfectly demonstrates the relationship between Romeo and Juliet, and it seems to represent both of them as separate characters as well as displaying how they interact:

JULIET. ...Dost thou love me? I know thou wilt say 'Ay', and I will take thy word. Yet if thou swear'st thou mayst prove false. At lovers' perjuries, they say, Jove laughs. O gentle Romeo, if thou dost love, pronounce it faithfully; or if thou think'st I am too quickly won, I'll frown, and be perverse, and say thee nay, so thou wilt woo; but else, not for the world. In truth, fair Montague, I am too fond, and therefore thou mayst think my 'haviour light. But trust me, gentleman, I'll prove more true than those that have more cunning to be strange. I should have been more strange, I must confess, but that thou overheard'st, ere I was ware, my true-love passion. Therefore pardon me, and not impute this yielding to light love, which the dark night hath so discovered.

ROMEO. Lady, by yonder blessed moon I vow, that tips with silver all these fruit-tree –

JULIET. O swear nor by the moon, th'inconstant moon that monthly changes in her circled orb lest that thy love prove likewise variable.

ROMEO. What shall I swear by?

JULIET. Do not swear at all, or if thou wilt, swear by thy gracious self, which is
the god of my idolatry, and I'll believe thee.

ROMEO. If my heart's dear love –

JULIET. Well, do not swear. Although I joy in thee, I have no joy of this contract
tonight. It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden, too like the lightning which
doth cease to be ere one can say it lightens. (Shakespeare 2.1.132-161)

This exchange is only a small portion of the cleverly written conversation that Romeo and Juliet have in this scene, but it is certainly one of the best examples of both Juliet's cunning and Romeo's slightly ridiculous romantic advances. At first, Juliet cleverly predicts what Romeo will think and say before he has a chance to get a word in edgewise. When Romeo finally does talk, he speaks of vows and wishes to swear his love for Juliet upon something, but Juliet sees right through his passionate speeches and romantic idealism. This intuitiveness is yet another example of just how much more level-headed and mature Juliet is than Romeo. What follows is a brief exchange, the meaning of which has been greatly debated:

ROMEO. O, wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied?

JULIET. What satisfaction canst thou have tonight? (Shakespeare 2.1.167-8)

It is unknown whether Juliet's line here means that she is truly so naïve that she doesn't know what else Romeo could possibly want, or if she is just continuing to wittily tease Romeo. Either way, this line characterizes both Juliet's youth and naïveté, but also her cleverness.

So how do different filmmakers choose bring this scene to life? In Zeffirelli's version, this whole film is a very classic rendition of the text, and the balcony scene is no different. One notable choice in Zeffirelli's film is the age of his two protagonists. Romeo is played by Leonard Whiting, aged 17, and Juliet by Olivia Hussey, who was only 15. It has been debated as to whether or not it works to have such young actors play two such iconic characters, particularly in the case of Hussey as Juliet. Two of the most important criteria for anyone playing Juliet are the appearance of innocence and the ability to deliver her incredibly witty and clever lines. There is little doubt about Hussey's abilities when it comes to the former of those requirements, for her youth certainly gives her a strong sense of genuine innocence and naïveté. A perfect example of this is her delivery of the line "What satisfaction canst thou have tonight?" (Shakespeare 2.1.168), which is said with a look of angelic, questioning innocence that is perfectly fitting of Juliet's character. As to the other important aspect, the witty delivery of lines, this is an area where Hussey seems to fall short. In such an iconic and cleverly written scene as this, it is important for Juliet to speak with the cunning and wittiness that Shakespeare seems to have intended. To do this, it is necessary for an actress to have an underlying sense of just how clever the lines that she is speaking are, but this does not seem to be the case with Olivia Hussey. In this scene in particular, it feels as though she is simply reading from a script, and may not have full knowledge of what the things she is saying mean. This lack of understanding is likely to be simply because of her young age, which proves to be both a boon and a burden for Hussey as Juliet.

Another key observation to make about Zeffirelli's balcony scene is the amount of energy and action that he puts into it. This scene takes place on a very long balcony, allowing for much running back and forth, especially near the end of the scene when Juliet repeatedly begins to go

inside, only to run back again to ask Romeo questions regarding their planned wedding the next day. Also adding to the enhanced energy of this scene is the tree that Romeo uses to climb onto the balcony, and subsequently hangs from for the majority of the scene. All of this hanging and jumping around gives a rather comical feel to Romeo, and seems to further cement the idea that Romeo is a silly, love-struck boy and Juliet is the one with the brains. All things considered, Zeffirelli's balcony scene is a classic rendition that reinforces this idea of Juliet's superiority and intelligence, even if Hussey's youth does take away some of the wittiness of the lines.

In contrast to Zeffirelli's classic rendition of *Romeo and Juliet*, Baz Luhrmann's version is done in a rather bizarre, very "1990s MTV" style. Luhrmann's choice of location for his balcony scene, a swimming pool, is a perfect example of how unusual an interpretation this film is. This location provides the opportunity for a more physical and even comedic tone, which is obvious from the very start of the scene, where Romeo (played by a young Leonardo DiCaprio) climbs over the wall into the Capulet family's pool deck and stumbles around trying to avoid being seen by the security guard. He ends up clinging to a trellis as Juliet walks out and speaks her "what's in a name" soliloquy. As she is speaking, Romeo follows her around without her knowing, and by the end of her speech he is right behind her, so when he speaks he shocks her so much that they both fall into the pool. What follows is much more physical than both Zeffirelli's adaption and the original text. In fact, the lines spoken seem to be almost an afterthought to all of the splashing around and kissing. It is also notable that for the duration of this scene, the young lovers are trying to avoid being seen by security guards and cameras, which takes away from the more private atmosphere of the original scene, but emphasizes the danger that they are in of being caught.

A potential criticism of Luhrmann's film is the way that the lines are spoken, for both Romeo and Juliet (played by Claire Danes) have distinctly American accents. These accents are combined with the feeling that they are simply reading from a script and have no idea what they are actually saying. This combination leads to the feeling that the words being spoken don't have the same quality of emotion and wittiness that they do in the original script, something that is especially disappointing in a scene as cleverly written as the balcony scene. Between the amount of physicality and the seemingly emotionless lines being spoken, the overall feeling that seems to come from Luhrmann's balcony scene is that both Romeo and Juliet are silly young lovers, rather than the feeling from the original text, which is that Juliet is cleverer and in control.

So what do we get by examining the famous balcony scene so closely? As stated in the introduction, this scene is a perfect example of the way that Romeo and Juliet's relationship is influenced by the concept of homosociality that was so common at the time. Juliet is clearly dominating the scene intellectually, which would not be expected in the era that this play was written. The idea that Juliet knows what she wants and is able to articulate her thoughts clearly and cleverly would have seemed ridiculous to the male patriarchs of the time, who viewed women as good for one thing: furthering male friendships and political alliances.

A perfect display of this idea of male friendship occurs in act 3 scene 1 of *Romeo and Juliet*, better known as "the fight scene." This scene occurs on a blazing hot day, which seems to lay a backdrop for disaster, with the rising heat matching the mounting tempers and tension in this dramatic scene. The beginning of this scene is just two members of Romeo's "group," Mercutio and Benvolio, wandering the streets of Verona. Benvolio, who is by nature the more subdued and peaceful of the two, warns Mercutio that they should go inside, but Mercutio brushes him off:

BENVOLIO. I pray thee, good Mercutio, let's retire. The day is hot, the Capels are abroad, and if we meet we shall not scape a brawl, for now, these hot days, is the mad blood stirring.

MERCUTIO. Thou art like one of these fellows that, when he enters the confines of a tavern, claps me his sword upon the table and says, 'God send me no need of thee', and by the operation of the second cup, draws him on the drawer when indeed there is no need. (Shakespeare 3.1.1-9)

But Benvolio's warning proves to be accurate, for soon enough the Capulets show up and tempers begin to rise. Romeo then arrives on the scene and is goaded on by Tybalt, Juliet's cousin, to fight. Romeo refuses to fight, but Mercutio draws his sword and declares that if Romeo will not fight Tybalt, he will. A brief skirmish follows, and the result is Tybalt fatally stabbing Mercutio. Even as he dies, Mercutio still manages to produce some of his famous witticisms, and when asked about his wound, says, "No, 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door, but 'tis enough. 'Twill serve. Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man. I am peppered, I warrant, for this world. A plague o' both your houses!" (Shakespeare 3.1.92-5) This last sentence is repeated multiple times throughout Mercutio's death scene, as he curses these two families for their endless fighting. Romeo, overcome by grief and anger, duels with Tybalt and kills him. This action seems to shock Romeo, who cries, "O, I am fortune's fool!" (Shakespeare 3.1.131) and flees the scene.

This scene is an excellent demonstration of homosociality, showing what happens when the two main gangs of men in this play interact. Granted, this example is a rather extreme one,

resulting in two deaths, but it shows the intricacies of these relationships and the way that interactions between these powerful men play out. This scene is also a huge transitioning point for Romeo and his friends. Up until now, Romeo and his friends have been a group, despite his budding relationship with Juliet. His friends have, presumably, seen him become infatuated with many girls before, and assume that Juliet is just another name in Romeo's long list of love interests. But what his friends don't know is that by the time Romeo arrives at the fight scene, he and Juliet have already gotten married. Romeo is now a part of a marriage, rather than being a part of this privileged, high-spirited group of friends that we have seen thus far throughout the play. In a way, the death of Mercutio is a brutal and unfortunate metaphor for the death of this group of friends.

After the fight scene, we continue to see a shift in Romeo's mindset from his previous homosocial, group-minded thinking, to being more "couple-minded," so to speak. Shortly after this scene, we see a glimpse, however brief, at what has been called one of the only truly happy marriages in all of Shakespeare. The famed "lark and nightingale" scene shows us Romeo and Juliet in the morning after the one night that they get to spend together as a married couple, and is called so due to the following conversation:

JULIET. Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day. It was the nightingale, and not the lark, that pierced the fear-full hollow of thine ear. Nightly she sings on yon pom'granate tree. Believe me, love, it was the nightingale.

ROMEO. It was the lark, the herald of the morn, no nightingale. Look, love, what envious streaks do lace the severing clouds in yonder east. Night's candles

are burnt out, and jocund day stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops. I
must be gone and live, or stay and die. (Shakespeare, 3.5.1-11)

The conversation continues on in this manner, with the two lightly arguing whether the bird that they hear singing is the nightingale, meaning that it is still night and Romeo can stay a while longer, or the lark, signaling dawn and Romeo's imminent departure. This scene is one of the only times, if not the only time, that we see Romeo and Juliet truly peaceful and happy, even though looming over this happiness is the knowledge that Romeo must soon leave for an undetermined amount of time due to his banishment from Verona.

In contrast to this happy marriage, there is a moment earlier in the play where we can see the darker, and, unfortunately, more common result of marriage at the time of this play. As mentioned previously, at the center of homosociality is the idea of treating women as pieces of property, using them almost like money to secure male friendships or business partnerships. These dealings, however, inevitably led to many unhappy marriages, and divorce was very frowned upon at the time, leaving these unhappy couples with little choice but to put up with each other until one of them dies. One perfect example of this type of relationship is that of Juliet's parents, Lord and Lady Capulet. It is seen in many different scenes that the Capulets have a difficult marriage, but there is one scene in particular that, read closely, gives us a perfect illustration of what their marriage has come to. In this scene, Lord Capulet is talking to Paris, who wants to marry Juliet, about how young Juliet is:

CAPULET. But saying o'er what I have said before. My child is yet a stranger in
 the world; she hath not seen the change of fourteen years. Let two more
 summers wither in their pride ere we may think her ripe to be a bride.

PARIS. Younger than she are happy mothers made.

CAPULET. And too soon marred are those early made. (Shakespeare 1.2.7-13)

In Zeffirelli's film, at the precise moment that Lord Capulet says, "And too soon marred are those early made," (in other words, those early marriages don't usually end well) he happens to look through a window and catch a glimpse of his wife, who gives him a withering glare before shutting the curtain on him. Although Zeffirelli's interpretation is merely one of many possible ways to bring this scene to life, his way seems absolutely spot-on, demonstrating Lord Capulet hope that his daughter's marriage won't end up like his.

What does it say that Lord and Lady Capulet's marriage, which from the start has been dictated by the rules of homosociality, is so miserable, while the marriage of Romeo and Juliet seems to be so much happier? Granted, Romeo and Juliet are still young and in love, and due to the tragic end to their relationship, we have no way of knowing if they would have stayed so blissfully happy. But what we do know is that Romeo and Juliet seem to refuse the rules of homosociality, just as they refuse the rules of their respective families that don't allow them to be together. Nowhere is this refusal to accept the rules that govern their society more apparent than in the death scene. In this scene what is perhaps one of the worst miscommunications in all of literature leads to the tragic ending of this play. First Romeo, thinking that Juliet is dead, kills himself by drinking a draught of poison, declaring, "Here's to my love. O true apothecary, thy drugs are quick! Thus with a kiss I die." (Shakespeare 5.3.118-20) Soon after, Juliet wakes, only

to find her husband dead beside her. Overcome by grief and hearing watchmen coming closer, she take Romeo's dagger and cries, "Yea, noise? Then I'll be brief. O happy dagger, this is thy sheath! There rust and let me die." (Shakespeare 5.3.167-9) This final act of dual suicide seems to be the ultimate refutation of the rules of their feuding families and the bonds of a society so dictated by homosociality.

In this paper, I have shown how interwoven *Romeo and Juliet* is with homosociality, and yet its rules are not followed or accepted by the two title characters. Although Romeo interacts with his "group of men," ultimately he turns away from that life in favor of a life with Juliet. Similarly, and perhaps more remarkably, Juliet does not accept a life bound by the rules of her father and the homosocial society that she is living in. Exploring the idea of homosociality in Shakespeare is not limited only to *Romeo and Juliet*, for it is present in many of his other works. Homosociality is heavily featured in *Much Ado About Nothing*, which at first glance is a light comedy. Looking more closely at the relationship between the characters of Hero and Claudio, though, it becomes apparent that the play has a much darker undertone. Although Hero and Claudio seem to be in love, their relationship is shaded by the fact that Hero will inherit a large amount of land and money from her father. It is also darkened by the many male friendships that dictate the actions of the play. This idea of homosociality is especially apparent in the final scene, where Claudio, Hero's husband-to-be, and Leonato, Hero's father, both cruelly reject her because they believe that she is no longer a virgin. Despite the play's apparent "happy ending," one is left wondering whether a marriage as seemingly delicate as theirs will really work out in the long run. Another Shakespearean example of homosociality occurs in *Macbeth*. In this play, Macbeth's questionable and cruel actions to seize power are encouraged and thought up by his wife. Although it is arguable that Macbeth has some of these thoughts on his own and would do

these dirty deeds anyway, Lady Macbeth certainly has her hands in things. She often seems to be urging Macbeth to do these things because she herself cannot do them due to the fact that she, just like Juliet and Hero, is a woman living in a man's world. But despite living in the confines of this type of world, the cleverness and strong wills of these kind of female characters show us that even in a society with rules that seems so archaic today, women such as Juliet can break free and take control of their lives.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. "Romeo and Juliet." *The Norton Anthology*. 2nd ed. Eds. Stephan Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katherine Eisaman Maus. New York: W.W Norton, 2008. 952-4. Print.

"homosocial." *Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition*. HarperCollins Publishers. 12 Apr. 2015. <Dictionary.com
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/homosocial>>.