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Masculinity and the Patriarchal Treatment of Women in Shakespeare

There are many forms of masculinity that are displayed in William Shakespeare's plays. In *Romeo and Juliet* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, male love, jealousy, selfishness, and rage are the most dominant of these forms within the plays. In both plays, a majority of the men treat women like their property. The toxic masculinity that some characters are consumed with runs rampant through the main plot. This toxic masculinity is reinforced by the patriarchy and male feelings of superiority over women by the male characters of the play. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines patriarchy as a "social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family, the legal dependence of wives and children, and the reckoning of descent and inheritance in the male line." In a patriarchy, women are equated to objects which can be given, taken, and traded for power and wealth. Women hold little to no power in the family and rarely have a voice. A woman's worth is directly tied to her eligibility to marry, which comes from her virginity, should she come from a family of wealth. This worth makes women's sexuality, particularly that of Juliet and Hero, a point of contention between the men of their respective plays. Men place this value on women for their own benefit, and do not take the feelings of women into account. Women's sexuality is controlled by the men due to their own feelings of cuckoldry anxiety, selfishness, and jealousy. This essay will analyze the patriarchal treatment of women in these plays, demonstrating how homosociality creates a male mistrust toward women.

The depictions of Mercutio and Lord Capulet in Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) and Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), as well as the depictions of Leonato and Claudio in Kenneth Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), vary in many aspects; however, when it comes down to the portrayal of masculinity, the three films are very similar. This essay will dissect the portrayals of various male characters both on the page and in film in the context of this masculinity, and examine how their representations impact their treatment of women. Characters such as Lord Capulet, Leonato, Claudio, and Mercutio all embody differing traits of masculinity, yet at root, their toxicity stems from one thing: a hatred of women, also known as misogyny.

Much Ado About Nothing's text starts with Claudio and Don Pedro devising a plan through which Pedro will woo Hero in order to hand her to Claudio. Right off the bat, this plan shows that both Pedro and Claudio view Hero as property. Pedro says that "I will [broach the topic] with her and her father, and thou shalt have her" (1.1.265-66). Claudio agrees to this scheme because he becomes aware that Hero is her father's only heir, according to Pedro. As the daughter of the governor of Messina, she comes with a dowry. This plan turns sour when Don John, Pedro's half-brother, decides to take revenge on his brother by targeting Claudio, who he sees as Pedro's right-hand man. John tricks Claudio into believing that Pedro is after Hero himself, and John and his servant Borachio fabricate statements in order to convince him of this lie. Claudio immediately believes them, saying "'Tis certain so. The Prince woos for himself" (2.1.155), and then becomes jealous of what he thinks he has lost. The toxic trait of jealousy introduces a common theme of cuckoldry anxiety, primarily in Claudio.

Cuckoldry anxiety comes from a male mistrust of women, wherein men have anxiety over the prospect of women being unfaithful to them, turning the men into cuckolds. Claudio has a lot of cuckoldry anxiety in the play, which primarily comes from his tendency to believe

everything he hears about Hero without actually discussing anything with her. He instantly believes what John and Borachio tell him about the Prince taking Hero for himself; and more dangerously, in 3.2, when John tells Claudio that Hero has actually been unfaithful, he believes him. The fact that Claudio and Pedro both believe John over what they know about Hero shows the concept of homosociality. As defined by Eve Sedgwick, in “Between Men,” homosociality describes the relationships between members of the same sex, and how they interact with one another. The bonds that men form in particular, causes them to trust other men without question, while producing a complete mistrust for women. Despite the fact that John has proven himself to have bad intentions many times before, Claudio and Pedro believe him over Hero because he is another man.

When it comes to women, Mercutio too makes his opinions clear. Nearly every time he speaks in *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio demeans women. He constantly makes sexual jokes, which are often laced with violence. This tendency toward violence can be seen in 1.4 when Mercutio says to Romeo: “If love be rough with you, be rough with love; Prick love for pricking, and you beat love down” (1.4.25-26). Mercutio’s jokes not only demean women, but also demonize women and their sexuality. He talks about “foul sluttish hairs” (1.4.88), and says “this is the hag, when maids lie on their backs, that presses them and learns them first to bear” (1.4.90-91). His diction suggests violence and hatred toward women and heterosexual sex. Although Mercutio makes several of these remarks throughout Acts 1-3; the best example of this habit is in his Queen Mab speech (1.4). Mercutio raves here about Queen Mab, sharing tones of extreme misogyny and a very clear mistrust of, and hatred for, women. He says that “Sometime she driveth o’er a soldier’s neck, And then dreams he of cutting foreign throats” (1.4.80-81), which indicates Queen Mab as the reason why soldiers kill. In doing so, he absolves men of the blame

and places it on Queen Mab, and by extension, women. He continues to accuse Queen Mab of being essentially the root cause of evil, blaming her for everything that is wrong in the world. In both Zeffirelli's and Luhrmann's versions of the Queen Mab speech, Mercutio almost appears possessed with rage. Both versions stage him reciting this speech in a hysterical, manic episode, seething with anger and loathing. Mercutio's hatred of women appears to be rooted deep within himself and the Queen Mab speech offers just a glimpse of that contempt. As the play progresses, we see this disdain for women take hold in the form of Rosaline, and that is where Mercutio's masculine trait becomes apparent, in the form of male love and jealousy.

When Romeo does not return home the night after the party, Mercutio immediately jumps to the conclusion that he has been with Rosaline. He says "Alas, poor Romeo, he is already dead— stabbed with a white wench's black eye, run through the ear with a love song, the very pin of his heart cleft with the blind bow-boy's butt-shaft" (2.3.13-16). Mercutio equates love with death, Cupid's arrow wound as violence, viewing it in a negative light. To Mercutio, Romeo finding female love is the worst thing that could happen to him. Mercutio makes many sexual jokes with Romeo the next morning in an attempt to get him to engage with the men again. Once Romeo joins in, Mercutio exclaims "Why, is not this better now than groaning for love? Now art thou sociable; now art thou Romeo; now art thou what thou art by art as well as by nature, for this driveling love is like a great natural that runs lolling up and down to hide his bauble in a hole" (2.3.80-84). It is clear that Mercutio is jealous of Romeo's perceived relationship with Rosaline, but in an article by Peter Donaldson, entitled "'Let Lips Do What Hands Do': Male Bonding, Eros, and Loss in Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*," Donaldson examines this jealousy more closely. Rather than seeing Mercutio's jealousy toward Rosaline as that of someone grappling with the fear of losing a friend, Donaldson interprets this jealousy as

coming from a romantic love for Romeo. Given this interpretation, Mercutio's hatred for women makes more sense, but regardless of the reason for Mercutio's jealousy, the jealousy itself does seem to involve the idea of women "taking away" Romeo from Mercutio. That potential loss explains Mercutio's hatred for women and drives his extreme form of masculinity.

Lord Capulet presents himself as the epitome of masculinity in its worst form: rage. From desiring to race into battle in 1.1 of *Romeo and Juliet*, to erupting at Tybalt in the masque scene, to practically disowning his own daughter in a fit of anger in Act 4, Lord Capulet embodies many traits of toxic masculinity. In order to label his masculinity as "toxic," it's worth discussing masculinity itself, and how it applies in this context. Masculinity itself in this play is not inherently negative; however, when combined with a superiority complex and an inflated sense of self, as seen in Lord Capulet, it becomes a problem. Toxic masculinity is defined as "a cultural concept of manliness that glorifies stoicism, strength, virility, and dominance, and that is socially maladaptive or harmful to mental health" by dictionary.com. Lord Capulet has many masculine traits that, when amplified, are extremely harmful to those around him. Although his toxic masculinity is harmful to both men and women, the extent of harm falls on the women. Lord Capulet has a short temper and he is not afraid to show it. In 1.4, when Tybalt claims he will defy Lord Capulet's orders and confront Romeo, Lord Capulet explodes with fury and lashes out. He feels as if his power has been called into question as he shouts "Am I the master here or you?" (1.4.198). He uses physical power to instill fear into those whom he feels are disobedient toward him. The mere idea of any defiance infuriates him, which proves to be a pattern. Having laid the foundation for Lord Capulet's explosive masculinity, I will now demonstrate the connection between his masculinity and how it reinforces the patriarchy.

At the beginning of the play, Lord Capulet appears to have a good relationship with Juliet. When Paris asks to marry Juliet, Lord Capulet responds that “My child is yet a stranger in the world; She hath not seen the change on 14 years. Let two more summers wither in their pride ere we may think her ripe to be a bride” (1.2.8-11). Despite Paris’ objections, Lord Capulet tells him to wait a couple years before marrying Juliet because she isn’t ready yet. He also tells Paris that “My will to her consent is but a part—” (1.2.17), which seems to acknowledge Juliet’s autonomy. This conversation might lead the reader to believe that Lord Capulet has good intentions for his daughter and that he does care about her feelings on the matter. Unfortunately, just days later, Lord Capulet goes back on his word and promises to give Juliet to Paris. Lord Capulet discusses his daughter as mere property when he says “Sir Paris, I will make a desperate tender of my child’s love. I think she will be ruled in all respects by me; nay, more, I doubt it not.” (3.4.12-14). This statement is a complete reversal of what he said in Act 1. He gives Juliet to Paris as if she is nothing more than an inanimate object, with no regard for how she may feel about the situation. He is ruled by greed in this action, and he acts in his own self-interest. Lord Capulet does not care about his daughter’s feelings; he cares about gaining Paris’ noble title and his riches. In Act 4, when Juliet refuses to marry Paris, Lord Capulet becomes enraged. He yells at her: “But fettle your fine joints ‘gainst Thursday next to go with Paris to Saint Peter’s Church, or I will drag thee on a hurdle thither. Out, you green-sickness carrion! Out, you baggage, you tallow face!” (3.5.153-57). At the first moment of Juliet’s defiance, Lord Capulet immediately resorts to threatening violence. Lord Capulet uses this fear and threat of violence to force Juliet into marrying Paris. His sudden change in tone reveals his character, in that it shows that he only truly cares about himself, not his daughter or her feelings. He feels that his power is in question and it drives him to blind fury. He continues this rampage of wrath by continuing verbally to

assault his daughter, saying “Hang thee, young baggage, disobedient wretch! I tell thee what: get thee to a church o’Thursday, or never after look me in the face. Speak not; reply not; do not answer me. My fingers itch” (3.5.160-164). Lord Capulet threatens Juliet with being disowned and expresses in the first sentence the desire to hit something. Without stage directions, the actual text leaves viewers unable to know exactly what Lord Capulet does in this scene.

However, in both film interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet*, this dialogue is accompanied by physical violence. In both Zeffirelli’s and Luhrmann’s films, Lord Capulet physically abuses both Lady Capulet and Juliet in this scene. This expression of masculinity serves as a power move, an attempt by Lord Capulet to assert his power over both women. He asserts the patriarchy, making it known to the women that Lord Capulet is the man and therefore more powerful. This assertion speaks to Lord Capulet’s misogyny and his feelings of superiority over women. His need to be in control drives his tendency toward violence and he takes this control by degrading and abusing his family members. Lord Capulet deals a final, metaphorical blow with an ultimatum: “But, an you will not wed, I’ll pardon you: Graze where you will, you shall not house with me! Look to’t; think on’t; I do not use to jest. Thursday is near. Lay hand on heart; advise. An you be mine, I’ll give you to my friend; An you be not, hang, bed, starve, die in the streets—For, by my soul, I’ll never acknowledge thee” (3.5.188-94). This ultimatum gives Juliet a harsh choice: obedience or exile. Lord Capulet makes it very clear to Juliet that she is powerless to contradict his will, and that if she defies him that he will disown her; she will lose everything. The choice he gives is harsh and it sends a clear message: Lord Capulet does not care about his daughter, or any woman for that matter.

In Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, written a few years later, a similar dynamic takes shape. A character named Borachio overhears a conversation between Claudio and Prince

Pedro in 1.1, which leads him to mistakenly believe that Pedro is going to ask Hero to marry him. He informs Leonato, who tells Hero this misinformation and says “Daughter remember what I told you. If the Prince do solicit you in that kind, you know your answer” (2.1.56-57). Leonato makes it very clear to Hero that she has no say in the matter of her marriage choice whatsoever. Her worth to him comes directly from her marketability as a wife. Leonato is the embodiment of selfishness and greed. Like Lord Capulet, Leonato is wealthy- the governor of Messina- but he is not royalty like Prince Pedro. He only wants Pedro’s title and the status that would come from his daughter marrying the prince. He does not consider how Hero may feel; he only considers what he has to gain from her marriage. Much like Lord Capulet, Leonato views Hero as his property, and he wants to sell her to the highest bidder to secure his own status. He ultimately finds his high bidder in Claudio, Pedro’s right hand man. All seems to be going according to Leonato’s plan, until Claudio accuses Hero of not being a virgin, which in the play is referred to as being a “maid.”

As part of John’s plan, Claudio and the Prince see a woman they believe to be Hero and a man speaking about their previous sexual encounters. In reality it is Borachio, who is in on the plan, and Margaret, Hero’s servant, who is oblivious. Instead of confronting Hero directly about what he saw, however, Claudio turns from jealousy to rage and decides that he wants to humiliate her and destroy her reputation by making a public accusation during what was supposed to be their wedding. He lashes out at her because he believes Hero has made him a cuckold even before his wedding. He disrespects both Hero and Leonato by giving Hero back to Leonato at the wedding, and then says “Would you not swear, all that you see her, that she were a maid by these exterior shows? But she is none. She knows the heat of a luxurious bed. Her blush is guiltiness, not modesty” (4.1.37-39). Claudio throws insult after insult at Hero, saying

she is “more intemperate in [her] blood than Venus or those pampered animals that rage in savage sensuality” (4.1.58-60). He continues to accuse Hero and then twists her limited responses to “prove” that she is guilty. He asks her what man she talked to in her room. When she responds that she “talked with no man at that hour” (4.1.85), the men interpret that to mean that she was not talking because she was engaging in sexual intercourse. It is because of their homosocial bonds that the men believe each other and not Hero. They don’t trust her simply because she is a woman. This mistrust is yet another reinforcement of the patriarchy.

In Branagh’s film, when Claudio accuses Hero, he yells at her and throws her to the ground, while spitting insults at her. He runs around in a rage, destroying the wedding decorations and throwing around the wedding benches. Hero is devastated as she cries out in desperation, trying to convince Claudio that she did not do the things of which she has been accused. She is extremely distraught, yet despite that anguish, Claudio continues to yell at her, lunging forward as if he is going to attack her. At one point he has to be held back by John and Pedro. This level of violence shows that Claudio’s primary concern is the potential shame of being made a cuckold. He does not care about his would-be wife. He only cares about his image and his reputation, and his public display of rage shows that he is trying to get revenge on Hero for what he believes has disgraced him.

When Claudio makes this accusation, slandering Hero in the process, Hero’s father Leonato immediately sides with Claudio, Pedro, and John. The homosociality between the men fosters a relationship based on blind trust for the men, and conversely it builds upon the mistrust of women. Despite Hero’s obvious confusion toward the accusations, Leonato jumps to agree with the accusers, and makes the situation about himself. He exclaims “Hath no man’s dagger here a point for me?” at 4.1.107, turning himself into the victim. He has been embarrassed by

Hero's alleged actions and his reputation is hurt; he is ashamed of her, though she has done nothing wrong. The accusation has not been proven by anyone. It is a matter of believing the men's accusations over his own daughter's denial. He does not question her on the validity of this accusation. Rather than investigating, or asking Hero questions, he launches into a long-winded speech where he makes the situation about himself. This egotism can be seen in lines 118-141 where Leonato uses the words "I," "me," and "mine" nearly every line while talking about how terrible Hero is.

Leonato mirrors Lord Capulet's actions in his verbal abuse of Hero. He asks "Why ever wast thou lovely in my eyes?" (4.1.128), and describes her as having "foul tainted flesh" (4.1.141). Leonato insults Hero with words of disgust and contempt. Like Lord Capulet, Leonato does not give her a chance to explain herself, and does not listen to the protests of Beatrice or Benedict. He continues his torrent of hatred and, just like Lord Capulet, he solidifies his hatred by telling his own daughter that he does not care if she dies. He once again asserts that he is siding with Claudio, John, and the Prince by saying "Would the two princes lie, and Claudio lie, who loved her so that, speaking of her foulness, washed it with tears? Hence from her. Let her die" (4.1.150-52).

As if telling his daughter that he wants her to die was not harsh enough, in Branagh's film, Leonato accompanies this speech with extreme physical violence. Leonato reflects Lord Capulet's actions as he throws Hero across the yard, dragging her by her hair, and screaming at her in a blind fury. It takes multiple people to pull him off of her and when they finally do so, he continues his verbal assault on her as he is held back by Anthony and the Friar. All of this violence against Hero derives from the mere accusation that she was not a maid. This brutality tells us all we need to know about Leonato's feelings toward his daughter. He only sees her as an

object, and it all goes back to her worth in the eyes of other men. Leonato views his daughter as property that he has to sell. Hero's status as a maid makes her more valuable in the eyes of other men, and therefore gives her worth in Leonato's eyes. The moment her purity is called into question, Leonato becomes ashamed of her and wishes that Hero would die, because that is all she is to him now: damaged property. Her worth is gone in his eyes, and he has nothing to gain from her existence anymore, so he is done with her. When the Friar questions Hero and they ultimately find out that the accusation is false, Leonato jumps from disowning his daughter to plotting a way to get her honor back for the sole purpose of marrying her off to the very man who slandered her in the first place: Claudio.

To Leonato, the only worth Hero has is linked directly to her sexuality and how it can benefit him, which is an important distinction. Leonato does not care about other women's sexuality, because it does not directly affect him. This double-standard is very apparent in the way that Leonato treats Margaret. Throughout the play, Margaret acts promiscuously and engages in sexual behaviors out of marriage; yet she receives less than a slap on the wrist from Leonato. The fact that Leonato does not care about Margaret's sexuality, but resorts to extreme physical violence over Hero's is very revealing of his character. It shows that Leonato only cares about himself because he only cares about what he stands to benefit from Hero's marriage, which is directly tied to her sexuality.

The toxic masculinity apparent in both *Romeo and Juliet* and *Much Ado About Nothing* is central to each story. The portrayals of Leonato, Claudio, Mercutio, and Lord Capulet in the text as well as on film show this form of masculinity and how it can be destructive. The actions taken by Mercutio and Lord Capulet set the tragic ending of *Romeo and Juliet* into motion, which include Mercutio's fighting with Tybalt; Romeo's exile; Lord Capulet's ultimatum; and Juliet's

plan to fake her death. Their toxic masculinity is indirectly responsible for the deaths of Romeo and Juliet, as well as the deaths of several other characters. Toxic masculinity is also prominent in *Much Ado About Nothing*, for Claudio and Leonato, including Claudio's accusations against Hero, and Leonato's siding with her accusers. The main difference is genre: the actions of Leonato and Claudio ultimately end not as tragic, but as a forced uncomfortable comedy. For Leonato, Claudio, and Lord Capulet, women's sexuality is used as a piece in the game of trafficking women. The National Institute of Justice defines human trafficking as "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons by improper means (such as force, abduction, fraud, or coercion) for improper purpose including forced labor or sexual exploitation." Leonato, Pedro, Claudio, and Lord Capulet all take part in the trafficking of Hero and Juliet in one way or another. When Leonato tells Hero that she must accept the proposal of Prince Pedro, he provides a stark example of coercion; and when Lord Capulet physically forces Juliet into accepting Paris' proposal, he does too. These women are under fear for their lives when they "willingly agree" to the proposals. Both women are treated like objects to be transferred between men through these marital transactions. The men of each play love it when the girls appear shiny and new, but the moment they think something is wrong with them, they throw both women aside like pieces of garbage. But Hero and Juliet aren't objects; they represent real human beings, which is where the problem lies. These men become so caught up in their own potential gains that they couldn't care less about how Hero or Juliet feel. They dehumanize them for their own benefit. Women's sexuality is controlled by the men due to their own feelings of cuckoldry anxiety, selfishness, and jealousy that comes from a deep insecurity in their own sexualities. Male love, jealousy, selfishness and rage are the problems beneath both stories, and these issues come down to masculinity that is put on a pedestal and glorified by the men in both

plays. There are many forms of masculinity in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, but at the end of the plays, none are as destructive as male love, jealousy, selfishness, and rage.

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