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The Tragedy of Gregory and Sampson: Teaching *Romeo and Juliet*'s Opening Scene

Romeo and Juliet is frequently taught as a tragic love story, with focus trained on the unfolding of the central couple's angsty romance. Many high school students learn to dislike *Romeo and Juliet*, and I don't really blame them; something's wrong with common conceptions of the play, which flatten it into a somewhat insipid excuse for Valentine's Day cheesy-sonnet-writing activities and Hallmark-Channel-sobs. Such reductions underestimate our students' capacity for understanding and enjoying the challenge of thorny ideas. Though Shakespeare scholars recognize the complexity of the play's treatment of gender, such views of the play don't always find their way into the classroom, partly because most secondary English language arts (ELA) teachers are not Shakespeare scholars, and partly because the communities in which they teach may be hostile toward "controversial" discussions or "divisive topics."

As much about hate as love, the tragedy critiques the kind of toxic masculinity that thrives on aggression and anger, turning communities into battlefields, men into adversaries, and women into prizes or prey. What makes the play interesting and painfully relevant is precisely how very rocky the Veronese social terrain is, and a feminist reading can help students to map the landscape and the characters' desperate struggles to navigate it. The play's toxic masculinities interlace with the romance and civil feud narratives, revealing depths that normally go unnoticed or unremarked. While the short scene I address in this commentary raises issues that may be difficult to discuss with teens or feel risky in some districts, they are all the more important as they illuminate our efforts to forge new gender and sexual identities in an equally troubled social landscape. The opening lines of any Shakespeare play are important, often subtly laying out central concerns in a way that we might not recognize until later. This means that a careful, close reading, conducted together as a class through teacher-guided discussion, is well worth doing, as it will enrich interpretation of later scenes. Immediately after the chorus' introduction, we meet Gregory and Sampson, two Capulet retainers, whose playful but anxious conversation about the ongoing feud does important work. As Moisan (2000) points out, Mercutio and Friar Lawrence are "Verona's two foremost social-psychological theorists" who make pronouncements about masculinity (p. 47). Though they are the more eloquent and innovative rhetoricians, their statements build on the earlier scene.

Gregory and Sampson are in competition with each other as well as with the hated Montagues, and as argued by Appelbaum (1997), each man is in competition with himself through "an inward rivalry, an inward pressure to masculine self-assertion that cannot be appeased or concluded" (p. 252). The men exchange jibes in a "friendly" one-upmanship that reveals their worries about

masculine performance. When Gregory jokingly accuses Sampson of cowardice, Sampson defends himself by explaining his mastery of the Renaissance version of manspreading: he'll be the one walking in the best part of the street, shoving others out of the way if he must. When challenged again, he claims that he will mercilessly kill the men and rape the women of the Montague house, commenting that because women are "the weaker vessels," they are "ever thrust to the wall" (1.1.14-15). In her early essay on patriarchal structures in the play, Kahn (1977) reads the exchange as evidence that rape is a cultural imperative, "Fighting in the feud demonstrates virility as well as valor... they consider it their prerogative as men to take women by force as a way of demonstrating their superiority to the Montagues" (p. 7). The conversation moves toward the general however, implying that even without the feud driving assault, rape is distressingly common, and that it is in fact a "natural" result of women's comparative physical weakness and their role in reproduction, as "vessels" for children. The cause of men's sexual aggression, Sampson seems to indicate, lies within the women, because in the same way that male enemies "want killing," women "want raping," inviting it simply by being female. Further, Sampson is indicating a parallel between killing and raping; both, after all, are accomplished by shoving phallic "tools" into bodies.

The exchange reveals the deep cultural roots of rape culture, the complex gendering of sexual violence, and rape's close relation to other brutalities. Moisan rightly notes that "a linguistic economy unites their sexual and martial selves" but insists that "their puns veer allusively toward sexuality and violence" (p. 49). On the contrary, I'd argue that there's no "veering toward" here at all. The puns are transparently and deliberately about sex and violence, frankly, about murder and rape. Both actions are aggressions meant to prove one's loyalty to one's house and one's masculinity. Warming to his topic, Sampson continues, "when I have fought with the men, I will be civil with the maids—I will cut off their heads" (1.1.20-22), clarifying that he means either to cut off their heads or to "cut off" their maidenheads, "Ay, the heads of the maids or their maidenheads. Take it in what sense thou wilt" (1.1.24-5). The joke implies that killing and raping are essentially the same, though according to Sampson, rape is actually a kindness since it is more akin to a "civilized" beheading, as opposed to plain, unceremonious slaughter.

His play on the word "maidenhead" makes it clear that Sampson is interested in raping unmarried women who are still virgins. In the Renaissance, the word "rape" was undergoing a change in meaning toward the one we know today: sexual assault. However, an older, now archaic, meaning defined rape as a form of theft: a raped woman was "stolen" from the man to whom she belonged, willingness irrelevant. Thus, a story from the *Iliad* could be retold as the *Rape of Helen*. Later in the play, this is exactly the kind of "rape" that Romeo performs on

Juliet; she may be willing, but she is still “stolen” from her parents¹. The two meanings merge and overlap, since women’s pain was secondary to the men’s loss. The main “injury” inflicted through sexual violence was to the male proprietor who was deprived of valuable goods and a great deal of status. Sampson not only wants to violently assault maiden Montagues, but he also wants to steal them from Montague men, decreasing their value as tokens to be exchanged via marriage and decimating the literal and cultural capital of the family. To add insult to injury, as if there wasn’t enough already, Sampson and Gregory joke with each other about just how Sampson’s sexual violence will be received, with Sampson implying that he is such a paragon of manhood that maidens would enjoy his vile attentions, “Me they shall feel while I am able to stand; and ‘tis known I am a pretty piece of flesh” (1.1.27-8). His standing flesh, his erection, of course, is “pretty,” and therefore, he would indicate, desirable. Sampson seems to think that any sexual actions from him will be not only welcomed but enjoyed.

Thankfully, the play’s presentation of Gregory and Sampson’s conversation isn’t neutral. As the scene continues, the men are shown to not only be rash and thoughtless, but also idiots. These men are not the “pretty” paragons of masculine courage and virility that they make themselves out to be. The play critiques their crass posturing and aggression, with the level-headed Benvolio calling the would-be combatants “fools” (1.1.61). The prince is even more critical, calling the entire group of brawling men, including Montague and Capulet, “beasts” (1.1.80). However, as obvious as the critique is, the play also normalizes such behavior, both the bragging and the brawling, by assigning it to common servingmen and nobles alike. Their behavior is idiotic but common; it’s the way things are, boys being boys, “locker room talk,” and only remarkable when it escalates to the level that actively disrupts the peace.

When toxic masculinity does escalate, it endangers patriarchal culture rather than supporting it. Though Kahn insists Gregory and Sampson’s chatter typifies patriarchal culture and designates “the feud as the medium through which criteria of patriarchally-oriented masculinity are voiced,” (p. 8) extreme masculine performances only disrupt homosocial, inter-generational patriarchy.

¹ Watson and Dickey (2005) also recognize the “legacy of rape” that plagues *Romeo and Juliet*, though they only briefly mention the conversation between Gregory and Sampson. They opine the tendency to ignore the sexual violence in the play, “The persistent silent erasure of these threats, great and small, by editors and critics typifies the reduction of the play’s exploration of the spectrum of sexual aggression into an absolute binary of rape and consent – a binary that may serve the ethical demands of our culture, but hardly matches the complicated experience of adolescent courtship to which the play speaks so engagingly” (127). It is worth noting that though others discuss rape, Romeo is the only character who actually performs one, according to the early modern definition.

Killing and raping may be “appropriate” expressions of masculinity when perpetrated on the outsider², but here we have a distinctly uncivil internecine struggle that blatantly threatens order, short-circuits the patriarchal trade in women, and deprives fathers of their political and economic authority. We might even propose that the feud is caused by a crisis of masculinity that requires overcorrects through violent expression; in the absence of an external outlet, war in its many guises, men “become men” by attacking those within their own social circles. The feud continues precisely because it enables a mandatory gender performance.

The question remains: how do we discuss such a scene, in all its truly disgusting glory, with young high school students? The play is most often taught in 9th grade; these topics may feel too heavy or too disturbing or too controversial, but students are coming into their sexual and gender identities during these years, now’s the time. Any discussion of the opening scene should probably be prefaced with a trigger alert; in my own college classroom, discussions of both this play and other, more explicit texts, like *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Titus Andronicus* which feature very disturbing rape scenes, I let students know our discussion must be treated with delicacy and understanding, and that any student who wants to remain silent, or feels the need to retreat, may do so.

The best approach may be simply to parse the section together and prompt students to think about the ethical implications of the conversation: “Why are Gregory and Sampson joking in this way? How are we supposed to feel about these jokes? How do you feel about them, now that you’ve had a chance to think about what’s happening?” Hopefully, students will be familiar with the Me Too movement and will be able to make the connection to modern versions of this kind of toxic behavior; if not, time for a minilecture! Students should think of this early exchange as part of the framing of the play and continue reading with this early “snapshot of the emotional ethos in which Romeo and Juliet live” (Moisan, 2000, p. 51) in mind. We might ask them questions like: “What does it mean to be a man in R & J’s Verona? What does it mean to be a woman there? What kinds of expectations are there for each gender?” Students will then be alert for problematic performances of gender later on.

Unfortunately, the conversation between Gregory and Sampson is frequently skipped, both in classroom discussions and in critical readings, and that only further reinforces the understanding that it is unremarkable. This is a missed opportunity to address one of the main concerns of the play, the way that a certain kind of masculinity undermines the social fabric and dehumanizes both men and women. As educators, we have the opportunity to de-normalize the toxic thinking

² Shakespeare’s own exploration of the psychological effects of sexual assault, *The Rape of Lucrece*, forcefully illustrates the ways in which behaviors that are considered acceptable in wartime are absolutely taboo when enacted in civil spaces.

typified by Gregory and Sampson, to highlight it and its disastrous effects. We can invite students to think about how the problems Shakespeare explores might be present in our own moment. Our students should know that even if the conversation seems to reflect “the way things are,” it needn’t and it damn well shouldn’t.

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