

What was Shakespeare's England like?

Shakespeare's audiences, watching performances of *Romeo and Juliet*, would recognize certain aspects of their own world. Many of those recognitions were of minor, taken-for-granted features of Elizabethan life. The rowdy servants who open the play, foul-mouthed and looking for a fight, were a common sight on London's streets. Capulet's masked dance resembles festivities in affluent Elizabethan households. Lady Capulet's elaborate comparison of Paris to a book (Act 1 Scene 2, lines 82-93) was a familiar reminder of the clasps and binding of contemporary expensive volumes. In Act 5 Scene 1, Romeo's description of the Apothecary's shop would recall similar shops which the playgoers saw daily as they walked around the city.

Other reflections of English society in the 1590's abound. The intense male relationships evident in the play were customary among Elizabethan men. Listening to Mercutio's mocking of fashionable Italian sword-fencing styles ('passado', 'punto reverso'), the audience would be reminded of the popular fencing schools which flourished in London, teaching those very techniques. The Nurse's talk of how her bones ache, and Mercutio's mention of blistered lips in his Queen Mab speech, could be recognized as symptoms of the sexually-transmitted diseases that affect many Elizabethans. Some critics have even claimed the Prince Escalus would remind Shakespeare's audiences of Queen Elizabeth, arguing that both rulers' apparent firmness concealed and underlying tendency to procrastinate and avoid conflict with powerful factions.

Beyond such topical reminders of everyday life there are deeper ways in which *Romeo and Juliet* reveals what Elizabethan England was like. What follows identifies important social and cultural contexts that influenced the creation of *Romeo and Juliet*: concerns about feuding and violence, the Elizabethan household and patriarchal authority, children and sexual maturity, the plague, religion, contempt for foreigners, and attitudes to death.

Feuding and violence

The feuding of the Montagues and Capulets reflects a well-known aspects of Elizabethan England: violence was commonplace. Dueling was a familiar practice; even the playwrights Jonson and Marlowe were each involved in duels. But duels were usually very personal affairs. More far-reaching in their consequences were feuds between factions of aristocracy. The Elizabethan upper-class families struggle to gain more wealth, power and prestige, they offended other families. The result was a smoldering animosity of household against household.

It needed only the tiny sparks of trivial incidents to ignite the enmity into violence, which sometimes resulted in deaths. Throughout Elizabeth's reign there were numerous vicious clashes. On some occasions there were pitched battles in the streets between servants or supporters of rival factions. Proclamations against public brawling showed that the authorities were alarmed by the intensity and frequency of such disputes. Prince Escalus' angry rebuke to the feuding families in the play's first scene ('Rebellious subjects, enemies to peace') would sound familiar to the ears of Shakespeare's audience. The historian Robert Lacey, in his book *Robert, Earl of Essex*, comments:

In such an age of naked brutality and casual bloodshed it was no coincidence that Shakespeare's plays should center on personally inflicted acts of justice and revenge: the feud between the Montagues and Capulets came from life in London of the 1590's where 'cutters' and 'hacksters' could make a good living selling their villainous services.

The Elizabethan household and patriarchal authority

The play provides lively portrayals of private life in a wealthy upper-middle-class family. As noted on page 59, *Romeo and Juliet* is a domestic tragedy. Its characters are not the powerful kings or warriors of traditional tragedy, but the leading citizens of an Italian city, rich not aristocratic. The domestic setting reveals significant aspects of affluent households in early modern England.

In Act 1 Scene 5, servants bustle about in preparation for the dancing that follows a meal. They scrape wooden dishes on which the food was served ('trenchers'), rearranged the furniture, make sure they save some of the guests' food for themselves, and arrange for their own entertainment later that night ('let the porter let in Susan Grindstone and Nell'). Like an Elizabethan host, Capulet gives the servants orders to provide more light, shift the tables and damp down the fire because the room has become too hot.

In Act 4, as Capulet prepares for Juliet's wedding breakfast, the talk is of baked meats, spices, dates and quinces. The servants bring in logs and baskets, and metal spits on which roast to the meat. The atmosphere is very like that of the activity of an affluent Elizabethan family as it excitedly prepares for a marriage, which the head of the family showing clearly that he is in charge:

Make haste, make haste. Sirrrah, fetch drier logs.

...

Nurse! Wife! What ho! What, Nurse, I say!

Go waken Juliet, go and trim her up,

I'll go and chat with Paris. Hie, make haste

(Act 4 Scene 4, lines 16-26)

Here, Capulet appears an affable if fussy head of the household, but his earlier treatment of Juliet reveals a far less benign aspect of Veronese - and Elizabethan - society. In Shakespeare's time, husbands and fathers strictly controlled the lives of wives and daughters. *Romeo and Juliet* reflects the subordinate position of women in Elizabethan England. Women had limited personal autonomy; their status and roles were subject to the tyranny of patriarchy (rule by men). Their rights were restricted, legally, socially, and economically.

You can find a more extended discussion of the consequences of such gender discrimination on pages 93-7 under feminist criticism. Here it needs to be said that Elizabethans widely accepted that the husband and father should rule the family, just as a monarch reigned over the state, and god held dominion over all.

Religion was a powerful instrument to enforce the belief of male superiority. The Elizabethan *Homily of the State of Matrimony* was frequently read aloud in church. It ordered wives to obey their husbands, and instructed husbands that 'the woman is a frail vessel and thou art therefore made the ruler and head over her'. That domination extended even more powerfully over female children, particularly with regard to marriage. Daughters were regarded as possessions, to be traded as the father saw fit in a marriage settlement which would benefit his family. Capulet puts his patriarchal assumption in its starkest form as he declares his rights over his daughter.

And you be mine, I'll give you to my friend

(Act 3 Scene 5, line 191)

The line is also revealing about the position of children in Elizabethan society. Sons and daughters were expected to be obedient to their parents' will, particularly their father's. But it would be wrong to assume that fathers had absolute power and invariably acted as tyrants. There is much evidence that in practice children had a say over who they married, and that good relationships existed in many families. Few fathers imposed their will rigidly. Capulet acknowledges this early in the play when he urges Paris to woo Juliet, but seems to suggest that her consent to the proposal is vital. He implies that his daughter has some choice in her marriage partner:

My will to her consent is but a part;

And she agreed, within her scope of choice

Lies my consent and fair according voice.

(Act 1 Scene 2, lines 17-19)

Nonetheless, during the 1590s the questions of a daughter's right to choose her own husband and her duty to obey her father were much discussed topics. The interest that Shakespeare's contemporaries had in such matters is evident in his plays. He explored the issues, so evident in Juliet's dilemma, throughout his entire playwriting career. As noted on page 59, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* another daughter, Hermia, is threatened by her father, who calls for her death if she will not marry the man of his choice. Other variations on the theme of fathers seeking to control their daughters' lives are found in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. All reflect the interest in Shakespeare's time in the extent of patriarchal power: how far children should obey their fathers. That such obedience was customarily expected and received is shown in the comment of the historian Lawrence Stone. He argues that an Elizabethan audience saw the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*

not so much in their ill-starred romance as in the way they brought destruction upon themselves by violating the norms of the society in which they lived

Those norms applied to every aspect of behavior, Just as the man was at the head of the family, so the family was at the center of social life. Conduct was governed by a web of complex and demanding expectations and conventions. Romeo and Juliet transgress one such social rule by marrying secretly. In Elizabethan England, every well-off family would have a forthcoming marriage very formally announced in church. The process of 'calling the banns' meant that the intended marriage was declared publicly on three successive Sundays. The wedding itself would be one of great celebration, with religious and social ceremonies that involved both families and their friends. By having the lovers flout social convention by marrying so hastily and clandestinely, Shakespeare creates audience expectation that calamity will surely follow.

Children and Sexual Maturity

The play also reveals aspects of Elizabethan practices and attitudes to children and childrearing. The Nurse's tale of putting wormwood on her nipple to wean Juliet reflects contemporary breast feeding practices. Many wealthy households employed 'wet nurses', women paid to breastfeed babies of the mistress of the house. Such women, often of low status, remained in the house and developed close bonds with the growing child. That relationship is portrayed in the Nurse's evident affection for Juliet

Much more significant for Shakespeare's contemporaries was the question of Juliet's age. She would seem very young to an Elizabethan audience, certainly far too young to marry. In the 1590's, men and women usually married in their mid to late twenties. To marry younger than 20 was uncommon, whatever the social status of the partners. Even among the poor, some degree of economic security was expected, at least for the male. So in making Juliet 13, Shakespeare was raising questions of social propriety. It was not considered decent to marry so young. Even today, a 13 year old marrying makes front page news and, as shown on page 99, in the eighteenth century David Garrick's version of the play (which held the stage for 100 years) made Juliet 18 in order to avoid criticism of her character.

The question of appropriate social conduct for a young girl has been relevant throughout every age. The Elizabethans would not only be disquieted by Juliet's marriage, they would be especially shocked by her behavior. It was quite beyond the bounds of accepted conduct for a 13 year old to kiss on the first meeting, to express impatience to lose her virginity, and to look forward to sexual pleasure. The fact that Juliet was played by a young male actor well have heightened the impact on Elizabethan audiences.

Juliet would be familiar to Shakespeare's contemporaries as a young girl in a prosperous family like so many in their own society. She is kept under close control, and has to ask permission to go out, even to go to church for confession. In such ways, Juliet conforms to expected rules for conduct. But for one so young to express sexual desire so openly, to disobey and deceive her parents so willfully, demonstrated behavior of which Elizabethans strongly disapproved. Contemporary ideas of femininity and youth valued submissiveness and modesty. By making Juliet only 13, Shakespeare increased the dramatic impact of his story and raised issues of immediate relevance to his audience.

The plague

Mercutio's dying curse, 'A plague a'both your houses!', held additional meaning for the plays original audiences. So too did Friar John's tale in Act 5 Scene 2 of the 'infectious pestilence' which prevented him from delivering the letter that might have saved the lives of Romeo and Juliet, In 1593-4, only a year or so before the first performance of the play, a severe outbreak of plague had closed all the theatres in London. For all Londoners, the plague was a constant threat. Almost every member of the audience watching the play would have been affected in some way by the plague. They would know some friend, neighbor or family member who had fallen victim to the epidemics which occurred all too frequently in England, disrupting normal life. For Elizabethans, the plague gave a curious and unnatural relevance to the

tragedy: it was yet another cause of children dying before their parents, just as in the play Montague and Capulet outlive Romeo and Juliet.

Religion

The religious beliefs of Elizabethan England pervade the play. Its language abounds in 'religious' words: 'heaven', 'heretics', 'mass', 'angel', 'God' are just a few of many such terms. Romeo and Juliet's first conversation is an extended conceit (image) that compares Juliet to a shrine or saint. Its vocabulary draws extensively upon Christianity: 'profane', 'sin', 'devotion', 'prayer', etc. Elizabethans would be completely familiar with the notion of pilgrims making long journeys to the shrines of the Holy Land in order to demonstrate their faith. They would know that pilgrims brought back palm leaves as proof of their visits, and so were known as palmers.

ROMEO If I profane with my unworhiest hand
This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this,
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

JULIET Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this,
For saints have hands that pilgrims hands do touch,
and palm to palm is holy palmers kiss.

ROMEO Have not saints lips and holy palmers too?

JULIET Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

ROMEO O then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do:
They pray, grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

JULIET Saints do not move, though grant for prayers sake.

ROMEO Then move not while my prayer's effect I take.
Thus from my lips, by thine, my sin is purged.

[kissing her]

JULIET Then have my lips the sin that they have took.

ROMEO Sin from my lips? O trespass sweetly urged!
Give me my sin again.

[Kissing her again]

Many members of a modern audience are not aware of all the religious connotations of the dialogue, but to Elizabethans such associations were everyday knowledge. Early modern England was a profoundly religious country. Religion utterly dominated most people's lives in ways which it can be difficult to identify with today. Virtually everybody in England cared passionately about religion. It was ever present, a source of both comfort and anxiety.

Because religion pervaded almost every aspect of Elizabethan life, it is not surprising that *Romeo and Juliet* bears evidence of its influence. The English language was itself permeated with the language of religion. But Shakespeare added extra religious resonance by setting the tragedy in Catholic Italy, a society that was regarded with extreme suspicion by the Protestants who probably made up the majority of Elizabethan theater audiences. Since Henry VIII's break with Rome in the 1530's with the exception of the six-year reign of Queen Mary, England had been a Protestant country. Two major aspects of *Romeo and Juliet* would feed Protestant prejudices about foreign Catholics: the Franciscan priest, Friar Lawrence, and the lovers' suicide.

For Shakespeare's contemporaries, the very fact that he is a friar made Lawrence someone not to be trusted. In English folk tales, friars had long been characterized as figures of fun, full of human weakness. They were held up to ridicule for their deceit, hypocrisy and depravity. Friars were portrayed as secretly lustful, and addicted to all kinds of

sly plots and stratagems. In this sense, Elizabethans were predisposed to seeing Friar Lawrence as the meddling friar of tradition.

However, Protestantism, with its antagonism to all things Catholic, intensified that attitude, giving it sinister undertones. Many Elizabethans saw Friar Lawrence their stereotype of the scheming Italian priest. Their jaundiced preconception would be confirmed by his actions, most obviously the way he readily breaks church law in secretly conducting the marriage of a 13-year-old girl, and then deceives her parents with a dangerous plan of his own devising.

Few interpretations today regard Shakespeare's Friar as like that simple stereotype. He is seen as a complex character, who in some modern productions assumes great significance. It should also be remarked that some productions fruitfully exploit the play's religious aspects to create atmosphere and to provide characters with a 'past' that adds to their complexity. For example, Baz Luhrmann's film vividly incorporates Catholic symbolism. Images of the Madonna abound, Juliet's room is filled with religious icons, and in the closing scene she lies in a vast cathedral, brilliantly lit by the thousands of candles that surround her.

Elizabethans would also see significance in the lovers' suicide. All of Shakespeare's contemporaries worried about the state of their souls, about sin, and about what would happen after death. The question of salvation obsessed them: would they go to heaven or hell? Many would be shocked by the suicide of the lovers. Suicide was believed to go straight to hell. It is possible that for Protestants the shock at the lovers' suicide would be lessened by the setting: Catholic Italy. They believed, as the following section shows, that in Italy all kinds of 'unnatural' things went on.

Contempt for foreigners

Shakespeare lived at a time when England was rapidly becoming more wealthy as it expanded its possessions abroad. With that expansion, often through conquest, came a growing sense of national identity. But as they felt more secure in themselves as a nation, the English developed unflattering or contemptuous views of foreigners. Italy and Italians suffered particularly from this Elizabethan stereotyping. The popular attitude of the time to Italy was often that of scorn and ridicule. It was a place where all kinds of 'unnatural' things were perpetrated: murder, lust and vice of all kinds. In reality, 'unnatural' meant things that were thought to be 'unEnglish'.

Italy was seen as a corrupt country, where treachery and perversion flourished. Italians were regarded by many English men and women as deceitful, unreliable and vengeful, always working out treacherous plots and intrigues. Some of the roots of that suspicion lay in religion, particularly the anti-Catholicism fostered by King Henry VIII's break with Rome. But it was fuelled by all kinds of contemporary propaganda. Here, for example, is Thomas Nashe, writing in the 1590s:

O Italy, the Academy of manslaughter, the sporting place of murder, the Apothecary shop of poison for all nations: how many kinds of weapons hast thou invented for malice?

Nashe's condemnation echoes that of Roger Ascham, who had been tutor to Princess Elizabeth before she became Queen. In *The Schoolmaster* (1570) he wrote of Italy:

sin by lust and vanity, hath and doth breed up everywhere
common contempt of God's word, private contention in many
families, open factions in every city.

Ascham's comment in 'faction' refers to frequent blood feuds for which Italy was notorious. Frederick R. Bryson in *The Sixteenth-Century Duel* gives an account of one such Italian feud:

In 1567 a private battle was fought at Sassoferrato. The origin of the dissension was the loan of a small sum by Jofo Baroni to a son of Meo Jani. From an ensuing dispute there arose between the families Jani and Calderani a feud which in the course of time led to death of fourteen men and two young women; the latter were both killed in a duel for which they had each challenged each other.

Knowledge of such feuds (albeit in garbled form) and the prejudices exhibited by Nashe and Ascham were the kinds of popular belief that help explain Elizabethan and Jacobean enthusiasm for dramatic portrayals of corrupt Italian. Jacobean tragedies such as John Webster's *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* are extreme examples of the genre that so appealed to English prejudices. *Romeo and Juliet* is not usually thought of together with such biased depictions. But the play's recurring violence, the emotional ferocity of some of its characters, a shockingly underage heroine, together with a scheming friar are among its features which appealed to Elizabethan preconceptions of Italy as a place of extreme passions and sexual license.

Death

Romeo and Juliet, a play centrally concerned with love, seems equally preoccupied with death. At several points, Juliet is imagined as Death's bride, and just before she drinks the potion she fantasizes about lying in the in the Capulet tomb surrounded by the rotting corpses of her ancestors.

Such apparently morbid fixations did not seem bizarre or ghoulish to Shakespeare's contemporaries. They regarded death and decay in ways that western society today finds unfamiliar, and often abhorrent. Elizabethan looked human mortality squarely in the face. Disease and death were ever-present for most families. The average life expectancy was little more than 30 years, there was a high infant death rate, and, as noted above, the plague was a regular visitor to city and country alike.

With death such a familiar experience, it found all kinds of everyday expression. Bones and skull frequently figured in paintings and woodcuts. Tomb sculptures often portrayed the physical signs of human decay, sometimes presenting two versions of the dead person: one richly clothes as in life, the other a mere skeleton. People kept, or gave each other, *momemo mori*: reminders of mortality, like small carved death's heads. Most English churchyards contained a charnel-house. It was a building where bones and skulls were stacked after they were dug up when fresh graves were being prepared for new burials. Juliet's description of what she would rather do than marry Paris was instantly understandable by Shakespeare's audiences:

Or hide me nightly in a charnel-house,
O'ercovered quite with dead men's rattling bones,
With reeky shanks and yellow chapless skulls;
Or bid me go into a new-made grave'
And hide me with a dead man in his shroud

(Act 4 Scene 1, lines 81-85)

Rituals associated with death were highly important to the Elizabethans. The mourning around the 'dead' Juliet (act 4 Scene 5, lines 14-64) often sounds excessive to modern eras, and is claimed by some critics to reveal only false emotion. But the ritualized expressions of grief probably did not sound strange or insincere to Shakespeare's contemporaries. Similarly, they would recognize familiar funeral practices in the promise of Capulet and Montague to set up golden statues to their children. It was customary for wealthy families to erect elaborate monuments to the dead. Many such memorials can still be seen in English churches.

Gibson, Rex, "What was Shakespeare's England Like?" In *Cambridge Student Guide to Romeo and Juliet*. Cambridge:

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