The One and Only Juliet: The Humanity of Young Noblewomen in Shakespeare’s Play
Xiaojun Zhang¹,a and Yexuan Xing ²,b

¹ Commercial School, Finance & Economics University of Dalian, Dalian, 116622, China;
² Department of English, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, 999077, Hong Kong (SAR of China).
a 2438227680@qq.com, b 1155204130@link.cuhk.edu.hk

Abstract. Feminist critics have made many innovative elaborations of the plays of Shakespeare, the most excellent writer of the Renaissance, expanding the interpretations of the various performances of his female characters. Romeo and Juliet is considered one of the most famous works of his writing career, which tells a romantic and tragic story from two young Italians in feudal times. However, Romeo and Juliet emphasizes more on the influence of inner experience on human choices as a tragedy. Despite the heroine lives in the Middle Ages, her willingness for love and personality liberation breaks the stereotype of women as weak and submissive. Therefore, this paper will explore Shakespeare’s rewriting of the image of Juliet as a medieval noble lady and analyze her unique humanism and desire for spiritual freedom.

Keywords: Humanism, Humanistic concern, Human history, Shakespeare.

1. Introduction

According to the analysis presented by Carole McKewin, it becomes evident that Shakespeare recurrently leveraged the prevailing societal stereotypes concerning women to accentuate dramatic tensions within his works, even though the unfolding of the play itself challenges the veracity of such stereotypes (McKewin 163). Feminist critics have made many innovative elaborations of the plays of Shakespeare, the most excellent writer of the Renaissance, expanding the interpretations of the various performances of his female characters. Romeo and Juliet is considered one of the most famous works of his writing career, which tells a romantic and tragic story from two young Italians in feudal times. As Marilyn French points out, Shakespeare’s plays can be categorized into two types: romantic comedies about the fusion and exchange of emotions, and heroic tragedies about the pursuit of power and justice (Erickson 193). However, Romeo and Juliet emphasizes more on the influence of inner experience on human choices as a tragedy. Despite the heroine lives in the Middle Ages, her willingness for love and personality liberation breaks the stereotype of women as weak and submissive. Therefore, this paper will explore Shakespeare’s rewriting of the image of Juliet as a medieval noble lady and analyze her unique humanism and desire for spiritual freedom.

2. Noblewomen in the Middle Ages

Although most women from ancient Rome through the Middle Ages have been eclipsed in history, the developing image of ordinary and elite women has been documented. In ancient Rome, only men had the right to vote, and women did not have the power to participate directly in politics. By the Middle Ages, the situation improved, women’s status was elevated, and their records became active in social and literary materials. As Cook and Herzman point out, “the frequency with which women appear in such legal documents [charters and wills] suggests that women’s activities in feudal society were more complex and public than often imagined” (167). It indicated that women were significantly more empowered than in the Renaissance.¹ However, their human needs are often ignored, both in terms of behaviour and personality “[are] confined by the norms of society” (O’Pry-Reynolds 185). They are completely deceitful, sexual, innocent, or incompetent in literature. In addition, the influence of chivalry and courtly love made the Virgin Mary the ideal
female figure, which lead to women being expected to live as Christian virgins or devoted mothers. Eileen Power accurately summarizes the requirements of women in the Middle Ages:

...perfect lady, whose deportment and manners do credit to her breeding; the perfect wife, whose submission to her husband is only equaled by her skill in ministering to his ease; the perfect mistress whose servants love her and run her house like clockwork. (81)

As a result, despite gaining more power and social status, medieval women were not free in their spiritual world and had to contribute themselves to the family and husband.

3. Juliet’s Humanism

The medieval noble damsel’s feature that Juliet possesses can be seen in the family obligations that she is forced to take on. As the daughter to Capulet, Juliet is entitled a certain social status and privilege. Therefore, she has to take responsibility for her identity and is expected to start a family early as possible to fulfill the common medieval purpose of linking the political power between two families through the establishment of a love relationship.2 Lady Capulet tells Juliet that she needs to get married and implies that Paris is the best person, which is also a stereotype that medieval women were believed to be sexually active at a young age so they have to marry early (1.3.69-74).

During the conversation with her mother, Juliet expresses her obedience to the family’s guidance: “I’ll look to like, if looking liking move;/But no more deep will I endart mine eye/Than your consent gives strength to make it fly” (1.3.97-99). In other words, her personal choices are not considered for the family’s benefit. When Juliet rejects the arranged marriage because she is in love with Romeo, both her parents angrily criticize her for her childishness and humiliate her without any regard for her grief (3.5.140-169). This stark contrast exemplifies medieval noblewomen’s passive and submissive nature, where they were forbidden to raise their voices and had to revolve around creating a better life for their families and husbands.

However, Juliet’s humanistic spirit encourages her to resist the fate of a damsel in feudal times and fills this love tragedy with romantic and pure human emotions. Her willingness to give up her family honor after meeting her true love shows her importance on personal freedom and happiness (1.3.33-36). Similarly, Juliet is prepared to conceal the Capulet family in order to marry and contribute herself to Romeo. Apparently, love is worth much more than a marriage with cooperative purposes. When Juliet learns that Tybalt has been killed by her husband, she first feels hatred for Romeo but then sadness for his impending exile in the future:

NURSE Weeping and wailing over Tybalt’s corse. Will you go to them? I will bring you thither.

JULIET Wash they his wounds with tears? Mine shall be spent, when theirs are dry, for Romeo’s banishment. Take up those cords. Poor ropes, you are beguiled, Both you and I, for Romeo is exiled. He made you for a highway to my bed; But I, a maid, die maiden-widowed. Come, cords, come, nurse; I’ll to my wedding-bed; And death, not Romeo, take my maidenhead!

(3.2.129-137)

Juliet’s tears are all for her love, implying that the significance she places on love has long exceeded the conflict and hostility between the two families. Her extreme sensibility towards love demonstrates Shakespeare’s emphasis on the release of human nature and sheds light on humanism in the love story in the feudal era.

Another humanist notion can be seen in the fact that Shakespeare does not emphasize Juliet’s religious conception as a medieval noblewoman in the play, but instead emphasizes her pursuit of freedom of love and human emotion. His age setting of Juliet could be considered to fit the pattern of an ideal Christian woman as a young virgin. However, compared to the image of a sixteen-year-old teenager in The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet, written by Arthur Brooke, his adaptation could emphasize Juliet’s tendency to become irrational when she encounters love, as
well as pointing out that her human nature to seek spiritual freedom because Christianity did not constrain her in such an early age. In the play, the influence of traditionally religious disciplines on Juliet is minimal, and Shakespeare never mentions her participation in rituals. Her moving space in the script is restricted to rooms in Capulet’s house, and she has to attend the masque in her family's company; even her conversations with Romeo require a nurse to help deliver them. She goes to Friar Lawrence’s cell in order to marry Romeo, and the only time she goes to church is because she wants “to know his remedy” after having learnt about her forced marriage to Paris (3.5.243). With this premise in Shakespeare’s writing purpose, the perception of religion can easily be replaced with a reliance on the passion for love, maximizing secular human interaction. An instance of Shakespeare’s attempt to emphasize the improvement of Christianity on human relationships can be found in the first encounter with Romeo and Juliet. Juliet used to engage in a metaphor related to the Bible:

ROMEO Then move not while my prayers’ effect I take. Thus from my lips, by thine my sin is purged. [Kisses her.]

JULIET Then have my lips the sin that they have took. ROMEO Sin from thy lips? O trespass sweetly urged! Give me my sin again. [Kisses her.]

JULIET You kiss by th’ book. (1.5.108-1.5.112)

The last line of Juliet indicates Romeo literally takes her words to kiss her hand. She does not show the traditionally virtuous rejection of the medieval damsel. Besides, the reference to the Bible is not meant to remind Romeo of the normative behavior, but rather a humorous expression of their pure and passionate feelings. As a result, Shakespeare does not confine Juliet’s mind to inherently Christian concepts but combines it with the humanist focus on human feelings, where even the respected Bible becomes a metaphor that can be used for flirting by people who are in love with each other.

In addition, Shakespeare celebrates Juliet’s inner self rather than her appearance, which transcends the reality of the importance placed on dressing by medieval ladies. Arthur Marwick’s investigation considers that the appearance of medieval women was considered to be suggestive of morality: being beautiful implied noble morals; in contrast, being plain-looking implied qualities would be suspected (68). Shakespeare hardly ever describes Juliet’s beauty, allowing the reader to know all about her only by her words and behaviors. In Romeo’s first encounter with Juliet, his love for Juliet at first sight is irrelevant with her physical appearance, but is completely touched by her inner spirit and temperament (1.5.46-1.5.55). Similarly, it is Romeo himself that Juliet appreciates after they meet with masks off (2.2.33-2.2.48). Moreover, when Friar Lawrence sees Juliet for the first time, he only focuses on the pure happiness that Juliet radiates from within when she finds true love:

FRIAR Here comes the lady. O, so light a foot, will ne’er wear out the everlasting flint. A lover may bestride the gossamers that idles in the wanton summer air, and yet not fall; so light is vanity. (2.6.16-2.6.20)

Apparently, Shakespeare subverts the medieval requirements of female appearance, thus boldly elevating Juliet’s spiritual world in the text to tell the reader this is the core of her attractiveness. This writing style also brilliantly allows the reader to enter the protagonists' inner world, experience their heartfelt passion and happiness, and in turn, feel sorrow for the unavoidable tragic end of the young couple pursuing true love.

4. Summary

In conclusion, Juliet is Shakespeare’s idealized noblewoman, embodying the virtues espoused by humanists. Her young body contains a strong spiritual potential, especially prominent in her loyalty to and pursuit of free love, her resistance to her clan-arranged marriage, and her intelligent resilience. However, due to the limitations of reality, Shakespeare was never able to create a second
Juliet who is willing to sacrifice for love with a strong spirit. In the early stages of his writing career, Shakespeare described his heroine too perfectly to diminish her realism and made Juliet’s story more like a subtle romantic legend. Future research can compare the plays before and after 1600 to observe the relationship between the gradual exposure of weaknesses in Shakespeare’s portrayal of women and the crisis of his humanist ideals. In this case, it can be found that Juliet is the only positive character in his play that concentrates on love, perseverance, wisdom and personality liberation, reflecting Shakespeare’s noblest humanism.

Notes

[1] Joan Kelly-Gadol mentioned in “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” that within the sociopolitical milieu of the Renaissance, the occurrence of women wielding political authority was considerably less frequent when compared to the preceding feudal system or even the conventional form of monarchical governance that evolved from feudalism (185).

[2] Joan Kelly-Gadol mentioned in “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” that during the Renaissance era, courtly love manifested as a phenomenon associated with influential male rulers and their courtiers, who actively pursued the establishment of a sense of reliance in women. This period witnessed a societal shift whereby female chastity and submissive behavior became more favorable to accommodate the interests of the burgeoning bourgeoisie and the dwindling nobility. Consequently, the emergence of the contemporary gender dynamics, characterized by the marginalization and subjugation of women, came to the forefront (175).

References


