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Juliet's Acquisition of Independence and Patriarchy

in *Romeo and Juliet**

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I. Introduction

It is usually accepted that, in *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet is first introduced as an obedient daughter, but by end of the play she has obtained self-knowledge and learned the painful realities of maturity.¹ Marjorie Garber argues that her choice of Romeo and not of her parents "is a measure of her maturity and self-knowledge," and that it provides "a paradigm of the Shakespearean pattern of achieved womanhood."² But she doesn't follow the process of Juliet, growing into adulthood in the course of the play, which should be a necessary procedure in any discussion of a character's growth. Katherine Dalsimer traces Juliet's development from a psychological perspective, in view of "the resistance of the parental generation of the ascendance to full power and sexuality of the next generation."³ It is Coppelia Kahn who connects Romeo's growth to issues of patriarchy, though a character's growth and patriarchy belong to different categories: she shows Romeo's struggle with the patriarchal society when he tries to achieve manhood through marriage with Juliet.⁴ But in the play Juliet's developing

process is much more stressed than Romeo's, so it should be necessary to shed greater light on Juliet's growth rather than on Romeo's, because Juliet's decisive power is depicted in contrast to Romeo's effeminate character.

In this paper I shall examine how the germ of Juliet's future development is prepared in the early part of the play, and how her maturing process makes manifest the autocratic nature of patriarchy, which treats a daughter as a means to propagate family assets, and this will clarify how issues of patriarchy are treated in the play.

2. Juliet at the First Stage of Adolescence

Dalsimer points out that, when Juliet first appears onstage in 1.3, she is introduced as "an obedient child" to her mother, and that "her adolescence has not yet begun."⁵ But when we examine the scene, she seems to have been already gained a kind of independence from her parental figures, although this is still hidden under her obedient demeanour. In this section, I shall reconsider the starting point of her development, seen from the viewpoint of the Nurse, her mother, and Juliet herself.

The scene in which Juliet first appears (1.3) has 106 lines, but she utters 5 times, and only 7 lines are allotted to her

altogether. All the other lines are spoken by Lady Capulet and the Nurse, and their talkativeness presents a striking contrast to Juliet's reticence. In this scene she does not show her will strongly and her apparent obedience is intensified: To her mother's summons, she answers, "Madam, I am here, what is your will?" (1.3.7). When Lady Capulet asks about the marriage with Paris, her answer is that of a good submissive child: "But no more deep will I endart mine eye/ Than your consent gives strength to make it fly." (1.3.99-100)

But her obedience is only superficial, and when we examine this scene closely, it may be observed that she is already at the first stage of adolescence, and that she is attaining her own self. First this is seen through the Nurse's eyes, how she regards Juliet:

For even the day before, she broke her brow,
And then my husband--God be with his soul,
'A was a merry man--took up the child.
'Yea', quoth he, 'dost thou fall upon thy face?
Thou wilt fall backward when thou hast more wit,
Wilt thou not, Jule?' And by my holidam,
The pretty wretch left crying, and said 'Ay'.
To see now how a jest shall come about!

.

And, pretty fool, it stinted, and said 'ay'.

(1.3.39-49)

Although this speech of the Nurse seems only to be her memory of Juliet's childhood, it tells us a lot about the present stage of her maturity: now it is the time that the "jest shall come about." This is not only a bawdy joke, which she is good at, but from her sexual viewpoint she sees Juliet as a young female: She already recognizes that Juliet is standing on the threshold of accepting sexual experience. Moreover, in this vivid expression of her joke, Juliet and the act of sexual intercourse are closely connected, so that even the image of Juliet enjoying copulation will arise in the listener's mind.

Moreover, the fact that Juliet has started on the course of becoming a mature woman, and is growing conscious about sexual matters, can be seen in her own little speeches, too. When the Nurse enjoys her own bawdy joke, repeating it over and over, Juliet shows her strong wish to stop the joke with a flat imperative form, though amusing herself by repeating the same words as the Nurse has used in her jest: "And *stint* thou too, I pray thee, Nurse, *say I*" (1.3.59, emphasis added). Actually

she understands the Nurse's bawdy joke, and shows dislike and liking at the same time. She has already acquired understanding of sexual matters, and this situation of hers is to be soon verbalized by her own speech of 3.2, in which she expresses her longing for the night with Romeo.

Another instance, which shows Juliet's state of development, is her answer to her mother's question about marriage. In this instance the comparison between Lady Capulet's absurd question and Juliet's bright answer to it is worth noting. Lady Capulet asks Juliet, "What say you, can you love the gentleman?", though she knows that Juliet has never met Paris before. This might imply that she must have married Lord Capulet without thinking what it is to love and what it is to marry; the decision was her parents', who would have been bound by the idea of patriarchy and been thinking mainly about the merits of the match. By contrast, Juliet knows that "looking" is indispensable to "liking", and "liking" is indispensable to marriage, and she shows her slight touch of independence through that view without realizing it herself. At this point she is ignorant of her own touch of independence, for she is sure that she is keeping her action within the bounds of her mother's consent. (And this speech of hers is ironical, because later her word is proved

true on the encounter with Romeo, when she "looks" at him and at once comes to "like" him.) It could, therefore, be concluded that at this point Juliet has already detached herself from her parents, and that she is becoming able to make her own decisions. Her reticence and apparent obedience to her mother shows, on the contrary, that she has accomplished a kind of independence from her parents, and that she is able to make a false show of being a good daughter (though the people around her, even herself, are unconscious of it). And this self-pretence of Juliet is to be observed in a more apparent and audacious way later in the play, when she is forced to agree to marry count Paris in 4.2.

In this context, it would be useful to consider Lord Capulet's response to Paris's marriage proposal in 1.2. He shows himself to be an understanding father, giving priority to his daughter's own choice. At this point he can pretend to be a sympathetic father to his child, only because he is not aware of his daughter's first step of independence, and believes her to be a good, obedient child to him.

In this way, even at the beginning of the play, Juliet's germ of independence from her parents has been sown and she has already acquired knowledge about sexual matters. Only at this

point is the first step of her development hidden under the cover of a good obedient daughter, and the conflict between her future development and patriarchal power, which will emerge afterwards, is only covert at this stage.

3. Patriarchal Background in Capulet Family

As I have suggested in the introduction, Juliet's maturing process and questions of patriarchy belong to different categories, but when Juliet's consciousness about love and marriage becomes the subject matter, the patriarchal problem, which might treat a daughter as a possession of a father, emerges, too. In this section, I shall discuss Juliet's position in the household of the Capulet family and Lord Capulet's attitude to her, considering this from a historical perspective.

David Cressy describes the usages of courtship and marriage in Elizabethan and Stuart England by presenting evidence from diaries and autobiographies, correspondence and court records, sermons and conduct books in his *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-cycle in Tudor and Stuart England*.⁶ He says that below the level of the elite there were plentiful opportunities for young men and women to meet and to mingle without parental supervision. He explains that "the

freedom of young people to meet their own partners, conduct their own courtships, and make their own decisions about marriage, was especially pronounced among ordinary folk who were not constrained by the burdens of property or an exaggerated sense of honour."⁷ But the higher the status of the families became, much more important the role the parents or friends played as go-betweens or matchmakers. Furthermore, Cressy records many cases where courtship began not from natural affection, but from hearsay or information from other people. He explains that there was no formal ceremonial process of courtship, but that everyone observed "the unwritten rules of a deeply patterned activity," and that "the crucial ingredients were solicitation and hearkening, well-conceiving and acceptance, with parents and intermediaries working closely with the parties concerned."⁸

Referring to this historical background, it is possible to examine the situation of Capulet family. The first word of the Prologue "Two households, both alike in dignity" reveals that the Capulets belongs to the gentle class. Juliet can only go out with the excuse to go to shrift, and this means that she seldom has opportunity to mingle with male friends to cherish natural feelings of love. And Paris does not go for suit

directly to Juliet, but first to her father, who rules his own family assets, and not to Juliet. It is, therefore, observed that Paris-Juliet case follows the typical elite procedure, which Cressy demonstrates.

In this context, the role of Paris is significant, when you consider how patriarchy is treated in this play. It is often pointed out that the role of Paris is enlarged in this play, compared to his equivalent character in the principal source of the play, Arthur Brooke's *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*. In Brooke, Paris is introduced only when Juliet weeps for Tybalt's death, as the plot demands a character to calm Juliet's sorrow; whereas, in Shakespeare, he is introduced early in the play as a candidate for the role of Juliet's bridegroom, who meets the demand of Juliet's parents, while later he is counterposed to Romeo as a rival of Juliet's love.

When Lady Capulet describes Paris to Juliet (1.3.82-93), she compares his faultlessness to that of a book, but her admiring words are only vacant expressions, which reveals her lack of sincerity, and furthermore her use of foot rhyme adds a note of artificiality, too. And her last two lines, "So shall you share all that he doth possess,/ By having him, making yourself no less," are equivocal in 1) Juliet can share all the

beauty and glory which Paris has, and 2) Juliet can share the property of Paris family by marrying him, losing nothing of the Capulets' assets; consequently, she discloses unknowingly that she is thinking of the benefits that the marriage will bring to Capulet family, rather than the happiness of her daughter Juliet. The Nurse also admires Paris, calling him "a man of wax," intending to express his perfectness, but in this case, too, this metaphor only enforces Paris's contrary lack of human richness. In this way, Paris's role as a satisfactory and flawless applicant for Juliet's hand in terms of property, is foregrounded in this play.

As the plot develops, this characterization of Paris never changes. In 3.4 when Lord Capulet makes a sudden decision to bring on the marriage, and asks Paris how if it were to be on Thursday, he answers "I would that Thursday were tomorrow," never considering Juliet's sorrow and its reason. Dalsimer sees this characterization of Paris in his use of words: "Paris is given language that is stiff and formal, setting him at a distance. When Juliet is found seemingly dead, his speech. . . is indistinguishable in style from that of her father."⁹ She compares it with Romeo's "terse and powerful response" on being told that Juliet is dead. In this way,

Paris's role as a favored candidate for Juliet's hand, never changes throughout the play; even his gallantness appears insubstantial, as the Nurse's words "a man of wax" express symbolically.

The last but not least factor to consider when discussing patriarchy in this play is Lord Capulet. It is often insisted on that he is a "considerate and loving father" to Juliet in 1.2, and he changes to a "tyrannical autocrat" in 3.5.¹⁰ However, again with this question, too, his tyrannical aspect is already prepared in the early part of the play, in 1.2, just as Juliet's self-consciousness, which will develop later in the play, is first hinted at. The following speech of Lord Capulet expresses his total willingness to accept Juliet decision, but very subtly his perspective as a patriarch lies only partially hidden under his disguise of an understanding father:

Earth hath swallowed all my hopes but she;
She's the hopeful lady of my earth.
But woo her, gentle Paris, get her heart,
My will to her consent is but a part;
And she agreed, within her scope of choice
Lies my consent and fair according voice.

(1.2.14-19)

L. 14 and 1.15 repeats the same words, "earth," "hope," and "she," and the two lines' purport seems to be the same. But whereas 1.14 tells that she is the only child to whom he pours all his love, 1.15 carries the meaning that she is the only heir who is to inherit his lineage, and hopefully increase his "earth," his family property. Furthermore, this contrast of a considerate father to his daughter and a patriarch in thrall to a patriarchal ideology is emphasized by the repetition of the same words. It is misleading, therefore, to believe that he is a thoughtful and loving father to Juliet at the beginning of the play, and that he will change into a tyrannical patriarch only when Juliet rejects the marriage with Paris in 3.5. Rather, his perspective as a patriarch is already made apparent in this early part of the play, which is to come up to the surface only when the circumstances gather together and come to a head.

4. Juliet's Acquiring of Self-decision and its Conflict with Patriarchal Power

Although Juliet has been, at least superficially, obedient to her parents at the beginning of the play, as I have argued, the love with Romeo arouses in her manifest change to her characterization. When the comical atmosphere changes into a

tragical one in the second half of the play, she is tried by one hardship after another, as she struggles to overcome the predicaments all for her love of Romeo, and by the end of the play these experiences have come to give her self-decisive power and her own autonomy.

The first example, in which Juliet shows her apparent opposition to her mother, is in 3.5, where Juliet is told about the decision to marry Paris: She rejects the decision with an oath, "by Saint Peter's Church, and Peter too." This unexpected downright rejection of Juliet makes Lord Capulet angry; Lady Capulet has no means to handle this situation, and in dismay leaves her daughter alone. And she is forsaken by the Nurse, too, her almost only reliable confidant, by being recommended to marry Paris (and by the Nurse's judgment it may be the best way for Juliet to choose to marry Paris, and to recommend her to do so is the Nurse's true and sincere intention). These separations from such parental figures, who have given cloistering protection to immature Juliet, allows Juliet opportunity to manage her difficulties with her own decision.

Finally, Juliet visits Friar Lawrence, who suggests the only remedy, which is "a thing like death." But even when she knows the effect of the medicine, she has no other choice but

to drink the sleeping potion, while her answer to the friar shows her strong will, "Give me, give me," and her next words, "O tell not me of fear," are the expression of her overcoming the fear of death.

The moment when Juliet finally acquires total self-determination and autonomy is observed in her speech when she dismiss the Nurse and her mother with a fair pretense and cunning excuse in 4.3:

I'll call them back again to comfort me.

Nurse!--What should she do here?--

My dismal scene I needs must act alone.

Come, vial.

What if this mixture do not work at all?

Shall I be married then tomorrow morning?

No, no, this shall forbid it; lie thou there.

Laying down her dagger. (4.3.17-23)

First the fearful state of her mind is expressed, and she cries, "Nurse!" for help. But at the next moment she realizes that the decision either to live with Romeo or to die must be made by her own self, and that it is she who must take the necessary action. Her resolution is emphasized visually by the preparation of the dagger, in case the medicine does not take

effect. These episodes show that the love for Romeo has changed Juliet into a strong woman who chooses her own way by herself, and it is observed that she has gained total independence and autonomy at last.

On the other hand, Lord Capulet reveals his true nature as an autocratic patriarch, when he makes the arbitrary decision of the marriage of Juliet and Paris without Juliet's assent. In this situation Juliet's checking remark sounds like much more plausible and sensible: "I wonder at this haste, that I must wed/ Ere he that should be husband comes to woo." (3.5.118-19) And when he asks his wife "Have you delivered to her our decree?" (3.5.138), "decree" is legal terminology as Levenson points out, and it also reveals his autocratic nature.¹¹ Now it is useful to compare this situation in the Capulet family with historical custom. Cressy explains that "the father's role was to facilitate, not to impose. . . . Their success turned on 'good will' and 'good liking', and the maid herself had to be courted and won. . . . The young man's responsibility was to make visits, offer gifts, and to bring his prospective bride to agreement. . . . The woman's role was passive, but not entirely powerless."¹² In comparison with such a historical background, the autocratic nature of Lord Capulet, who ignores

Juliet's intention and compels her to marry Paris, is underscored. And when even the Nurse, who is just a servant and has no such power and right, condemns him; "You are to blame, my lord, to rate her so," his tyrannical aspect is caricatured as something unavailing and with no real power. And this caricatured image of Lord Capulet is further amplified in 4.2, when Juliet pretends to accept the marriage with Paris. His tranced pleasure and enthusiastic vigor to "play the housewife for this once" are contrasted with Juliet's decision to drink the sleeping potion, whose effect has not been tried yet, and the contrast mocks his ridiculous behaviour.

Lord Capulet cannot escape from the ideology of patriarchy, even when his daughter "dies." His words of mourning reveal that he can only think from the perspective of his responsibility as a patriarch:

O son, the night before thy wedding-day
Hath Death lain with thy wife. There she lies,
Flower as she was, deflowered by him.
Death is my son-in-law, Death is my heir,
My daughter he hath wedded. I will die,
And leave him all; life, living, all is Death's. (4.5.35-40)

Here he does not weep for the death of his loving child, but

he grieves that Death is the heir of his property, and he cannot leave his wealth to his descendent. And even when the old enmity comes to end as Lord Capulet and Lord Montague shake hands at the denouement, Lord Capulet's word "jointure" (5.3.297) signifies that he cannot make himself free from the ideology of patriarchy. Moreover, at the very end, they compete to make expensive statues of their children, and this entails a slight shade of ridiculousness even amid their sorrow for their children.

It is, therefore, concluded that the step by which Juliet acquires independence and autonomy through the conquering of many hardships, sheds critical light on the autocratic nature of the patriarchal system which Lord Capulet embodies, and without which there might well have been no tragedy.

5. Conclusion

It is Juliet and not Romeo who shows conspicuous development from the first step of adolescence to the young adult who can act out her own decision. It is an accepted idea that in this play gender roles change between Romeo and Juliet, and that Juliet shows masculine decisive power when she receives the sleeping potion and when she stabs herself with Romeo's dagger,

whereas Romeo condemns his own effeminacy at Mercutio's death, and remains effeminate when he commits suicide by taking poison.¹³ Therefore it is Juliet's developing steps which give light to the autocratic nature of the patriarchal system.

On the other hand, Shakespeare shortens the action as occurring in just over four days, and this gives intensity not only to the forward movement of the plot, but also to Juliet's developing steps. Her maturing process---at the beginning of the play she showed submissiveness to her parents, at least superficially, but as the end of the play she has acquired self-decisive power, which defies even death---is unfolded vigorously at full speed. At the same time, this compressed energy also gives force to make manifest the autocratic facet of patriarchy.

In this paper I have argued that at the beginning of the play Juliet is already on the first step of adolescence, and likewise that Lord Capulet's perspective as a patriarch is hidden beneath the disguise of a considerate father. And the process, that Juliet acquires self-consciousness and autonomy through the experience of love with Romeo, makes manifest the autocratic nature of patriarch, embodied in Lord Capulet. Historical circumstance, which Cressy describes, gives ample

evidence of Lord Capulet's tyrannical disposition; furthermore, his position as a patriarch is mocked as something that lacks actual power, while in the treatment of Lord Capulet the autocratic nature of patriarchy is caricatured.

*This essay is based on the paper which I presented at the 39th meeting of the Shakespeare Society of Japan, held in Kobe on October 28, 2000.

NOTES

¹William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, *The New Cambridge Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984), 26. All the quotations from *Romeo and Juliet* are from this text.

²Marjorie Garber, *Coming of Age in Shakespeare* (London: Methuen, 1981) 39-40.

³Katherine Dalsimer, *Female Adolescence: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Literature* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986) 102 n.

⁴Coppelia Kahn, 'Coming of Age: Marriage and Manhood in *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Taming of the Shrew*,' in *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1981) 83.

⁵Dalsimer 78 and 87.

⁶David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion,*

and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997).

⁷Cressy 254-55.

⁸Cressy 234 and 253.

⁹Dalsimer 81-82.

¹⁰Evans 20-21.

¹¹William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Jill L. Levenson, *The Oxford Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 294.

¹²Cressy 254.

¹³Levenson 27-28.