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Victims of Greed

The tragedy of Romeo and Juliet does not originate from Capulet's failing to support "love and marriage as vital aspects of early modern family dynamics in the lives of the English gentry" by: not wanting to wait for a specific age for marriage, not adhering to his daughter's particular wishes for love, and not fulfilling his role as a provider and a father (Callaghan 315). Rather, the Bagot letters suggest that Capulet's motivations and involvement in the eventual death of Romeo and Juliet as entirely economical, and *not* unusual. By examining Romeo and Juliet through the context provided in the Bagot letters, we can see that Romeo and Juliet are ultimately victims of their parent's struggle to increase their economic position.

The prologue to Romeo and Juliet states that the feud between the Montague and Capulet houses, where "civil blood makes civil hands unclean," can only be unmade following their deaths (P.4). Yet Montague and Capulet continue their "ancient grudge" in the final scene while attempting to improve their position in the eyes of the Prince by competing over whom will create the greater monument of the tragedy (P.3). This reveals that the true nature of this "feud" as one of brutal competition between the houses. Because the issue of romance in marriage is central to the play, it is important to understand that "emotional issues and family matters ... [were] nearly always tied in some way to issues of property and its transmission across the generations" (Callaghan

314).

Because both Capulet and Montague were members of the rising mercantile class, and *not* the nobility, it is in their best interests to marry their children into a family that has achieved a class status that they could have not otherwise attained through money alone. According to the Bagot texts,

> "Marriage as the central relationship within the household, however, existed within a dense context of other social alliances, and with other classes of society" (Callaghan 314).

In this way, Capulet would use marriage as a means of extending his family's social network through the act of marriage. Specifically, Juliet's match with Paris is "clearly a means of upward mobility" for the Capulet house (Callaghan 316). Even though Juliet may loose the Capulet name, her marriage would create familial ties to future generations of the Capulet house by creating a pool for potential marriages down the line. Juliet then like Jane from the Bagot letters was "prodded into the courtship by her father for reasons of social and financial advantage" (Callaghan 322). Additionally, the intermarriage within closely related family members (within the bounds of the law) is a model demonstrated throughout the entire Bagot family tree.

When Capulet takes a dramatic shift in his position regarding the marriage between Juliet and Paris, his motivations in moving things forward quickly are firmly rooted in greed. The key to his change in attitude is seen when he claims, "My will to her consent is but a part," and yet it is the first thing to leave his mind when he decides to agree to the wedding (I.ii.17). Capulet is not alone in his decisions. For many Elizabethan parents, "Mutual affection is one consideration for a match ... but it is

often far down the list of concerns about finances and property" (Callaghan 316). Therefore, when he realizes that Juliet will not obey his wishes to achieve power, he disowns her.

Even if Capulet's disowning of Juliet sets in motion the events that ultimately concludes with her death, can his reaction to Juliet's rejection of marriage be wholly unjustified? Is there precedence for his actions? When he states Juliet's reasoning for being against marriage as "I'll not wed, I cannot love; I am too young, I pray you pardon me," the key argument is that her age is inappropriate (III.v. 185-186). This sentiment is *initially* argued by Capulet himself when he turns down Paris' marriage proposal early in the play by stating, "My child is yet a stranger in the world, / She hath not seen the change of fourteen years; / Let two more summers wither in their pride, / Ere we may think her ripe to be a bride" (I.ii.8-11). Lady Capulet seems to share this uneasiness early on by repeatedly stating that Juliet's "not fourteen" (I.iii.12,14). The primary source printed in the Illustrations of British History text supports the idea that it was preferred for women to marry "above [the age] of fifteen or sixteen," (Lodge) which is precisely the age range that Juliet would fit into "two more summers" following Paris' first proposition (I.ii.10). Additionally, the average age of marriage for Elizabethan citizens was the early twenties for women, and the mid-to-late twenties for men (Herman, 2008 September 30). This evidence seems to suggest that age was of primary concern when deciding the appropriate time of marriage.

However, the circumstances surrounding the "secret marriage" of Walter Bagot's ward, Humphrey Okeover, provides evidence to the contrary. The lawful "ages of consent - fourteen for a boy, twelve for a girl," show that Romeo and Juliet's marriage was

not illegal due to their age alone (Callaghan 326). The Okeover marriage was allegedly instituted during a visit to his mother in order to maintain the family property. This incidence sets a precedent for both "secret marriages" as well as ones occurring at a young age due to necessity.

Ultimately, the events following the lives of the Bagot family show that while the deaths of Romeo and Juliet were uncommon, the circumstances that lead to their fate were not. Out of Walter Bagot's nine children, more than one thwarted his plans for marriage by eloping, or disregarding his wishes by means of secret marriages. While marriage at a young age may have been *distasteful,* it was not *uncommon.* The age of marital consent in England is strong evidence against the notion that it was impossible. It was not Romeo and Juliet's actions that led to their deaths, but their circumstance. Capulet's attitude toward Juliet is more akin to Walter Bagot's attitude towards his son Lewis. This is because of his son's relationship with a member of a lower class. Capulet then sees his missed opportunity (due to Juliet's stubbornness) in a similar way; because she is denying him the class that he believes he has the right to through her. Capulet's decision to disown Juliet was driven by a loss of financial opportunity, and his failed attempt to use his daughter as a means of property to be bartered with reveals a fundamental problem with the issue of marriage for many members of the bourgeois class in Elizabethan England. The fact that his motivations were not *unusual* served as a warning specifically catered to Shakespeare's primary audience. Shakespeare shows that the construction of marriage as a financial institution *can* lead to failure, though not necessarily that it *will.*