

Ripe to Be a Bride? Marriage Age in *Romeo and Juliet*

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Key Words

Shakespeare, Marriage, *Romeo and Juliet*

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For some time, the published writings of Puritans such as Stubbes (1585), who declaimed that “little infants, in swaddling clouts, are often married by their ambitious parents and friends, when they know neither good nor evil” (*Anatomie of Abuses* cited in Macfarlane 1986: 134), in combination with literary instances such as Shakespeare's 13 year old Juliet, have led readers and audiences to believe that most Elizabethan women married during their early teens. It was indeed possible to do so, as the legal ages for marriage (with or without parental consent) were set at 12 years old for girls and 14 for boys (Haw 1952: 5). However, statistical studies of recorded marriage ages show that the actual average age for marriage was approximately ten years older than the legal minimum limit (Laslett 1971: 83).¹⁾ The legal

minimum ages were considered too young by some sectors of society, and attempts were made in Parliament to raise the age of consent for marriage to 15 for girls in 1563, 1604, and 1653, but the law remained unchanged (Outhwaite 1995: 7, 9, 12). Considering that these attempts to increase the minimum marriage age may have reflected public opinion, although Juliet is technically over the legal age specified in diriment impediment law at the time, she had not yet reached the age which was being recommended as the new minimum limit, so may have been considered borderline or even too young to be married. This chapter explores several contexts that may have had some influence or bearing upon Shakespeare stressing the youthfulness of Romeo and Juliet. In particular, it addresses the question of what might have induced Shakespeare to make Juliet significantly younger than her counterparts had been in the source works.

As *Romeo and Juliet* was not an original story, but one with a long literary tradition, I will begin with an investigation of marriage age in the previous versions to determine the extent to which Shakespeare reduced or inherited Juliet's age. There are several relevant factors already present in the sources, such as a focus on marriage between children of upper class families and an Italian setting, which need to be considered. Moreover, Shakespeare might have been inspired to write about teen marriage by current events. If,

on the other hand, we consider factors internal to the play itself, we may conclude that Shakespeare may have portrayed such young characters in order to accentuate the generation gap between children and their parents, or to reinforce his themes.

1. The Literaty Context

The story of *Romeo and Juliet* had many sources and analogues in the myths denoted by Wagner as *Liebestod*: stories in which “two young lovers face insurmountable obstacles; they encounter the obstacles with defiance and secret plans, but their resistance fails because of accident or misjudgment; finally both die for love” (Bijvoet 1988: 2-3). Other literary examples of *Liebestod* couples are Hero and Leander, Pyramus and Thisbe, and Tristan and Isolde. One such *Liebestod*, Masuccio Salernitano’s 1476 *33rd novellino*, bears recognisable similarities to the story of *Romeo and Juliet*. As summarised by Cavalchini (1974):

Mariotto Sanese, in love with Giannoza, is guilty of homicide and flees to Alexandria. Giannoza feigns death. She escapes burial and goes to her lover. He, knowing her dead, wishes also to die. He returns to Siena where he is recognised, captured and beheaded. The girl goes back to Siena, finds her beloved decapitated and dies of sorrow over his body (37).

However, Bullough (1957) gives the credit for the first actual version of the *Romeo and Juliet* story to Luigi da Porto, whose account, published in 1530, was titled *Istoria Novellamente Ritrovata di Due Nobili Amanti* (270). Da Porto’s story is set in Verona, the two lovers are called Romeo and Giulietta, and they are the children of the noble families Montecchi and Capelletti. This story was further embroidered by later Italian writers, with the most famous version being Bandello’s 1554 *Le Novelle del Bandello* (Bullough 1957: 270, 271). Bandello was then translated into French by Boiastuau in his 1559 *Histoires Tragiques*,

Extraites des Oeuvres Italiennes de Bandel,²⁾ then a verse translation of Boiastuau into English was made in 1562 by Arthur Brooke, under the title *The Tragical Historye of Romeus and Juliet Written First in Italian by Bandel, English by Arthur Brooke* (Cavalchini 1974: 38, 39). This was followed by William Painter’s (1575) prose adaptation of Boiastuau: *The Goodly Hystory of the True and Constant Loue Between Rhomeo and Iulietta, the One of Whom Died of Poyson and the Other of Sorrow, and Heuinesse* [. . .], but Brooke’s version seems to have been the more popular of these translations: after its initial appearance in 1562, it was reissued in 1582 and 1587 (Bullough 1957: 275). Although Shakespeare made substantial changes to Brooke’s “turgid emotionalism and pedestrian repetitiveness,” the similarity in storylines, even down to minor details, definitively identifies Brooke as Shakespeare’s source for the play (Bullough 1957: 278).

While Shakespeare inherited the story, he reduced the ages of Romeo and Juliet in his play from the ages of their counterparts in the sources. Bandello gives Romeo’s age as 20–21 (Brooke 1562: 249), which is reiterated by Painter (1966: 81). Brooke’s (1562) Romeo is so young his “tender chyn” sports no beard (l. 54), suggesting perhaps 15–17 (Franson 1996: 245). Shakespeare does not specify Romeo’s age, but generally emphasises his youth while suggesting from the account of Romeo’s crush on Rosaline that he is ready for love.³⁾ I would posit that this suggests an age for Romeo of around 16–18: older than Juliet but still young.

In da Porto and Bandello, Juliet is 18 (Young 1988: 461), with Bandello commenting that she has only just attained marriageable age (Franson 1996: 244). In Painter, Juliet is “not attayned to the age of XVIII” (1966: 104), while in Brooke, Juliet “Scarce saw [. . .] yet full xvi yeres: too yong to be a bryde” (1562: l. 1860). Shakespeare further reduces Juliet’s age to almost 14, “only just ripening for marriage” (Bullough 1957: 279).

Table 1 The Ages of Romeo and Juliet in the Sources and Shakespeare

Author	Date	Based On	Romeo's Age	Juliet's Age
Luigi da Porto	1530	Various Myths	Not Specified	18
Bandello	1554	da Porto	20-21	Only just 18
Boiastuau	1559	Bandello	Not specified	Not specified
Brooke	1562	Boiastuau	15-17?	Almost 16
Painter	1567	Boiastuau	20-21	Almost 18
Shakespeare	1595	Brooke	16-18?	Almost 14

A possible explanation for Shakespeare's choice of 14 for Juliet's age was offered by a nineteenth-century editor, Richard Grant White, who proposed that "xvi" might have been incorrectly transposed to "xiv" in the version of Brooke read by Shakespeare (Dash 1981: 258). I could not determine whether editions of Brooke with this mistranscription had been discovered. Even if this theory were able to be proven, it does not explain Shakespeare's increase in focus on the youthfulness of his heroine. The fact that Juliet is soon to be 14 years of age is mentioned "six times in two contiguous scenes," compared to one reference to her age in each of Brooke's and Bandello's narratives (Franson 1996: 248). Also, Shakespeare devotes a large portion of a scene (I.iii), for which there is no precedent in Brooke, to precisely reckoning Juliet's age "unto an hour" as "a fortnight and odd days" younger than 14 (I.iii.12, 17) (Evans 1984: 9). Therefore, although White's theory would propose that Shakespeare's decrease in Juliet's age from his source was accidental, it is clear that he has deliberately increased the emphasis on Juliet's age, turning it from a peripheral to a central issue.

There are several theories why so much attention is given to Juliet's precise age. One possibility is that the calculation made by the Nurse serves to connect Juliet with fate through her association with an earthquake eleven years ago (I.iii.25), which may be a reference to an actual earthquake in the memory of the

Elizabethan audience (Levenson 2000: 99-100). The fact that Juliet was born on "Lammas Eve at night" (I.iii.19), i.e., July 31, would have placed the date of her conception nine months earlier, on the night of 31 October-1 November, otherwise known as Hallowe'en (Levenson 2000: 172). The combination of a fateful conception day, connection with a fortuitous event, and a current age of 13 might have been further clues to acute members of an Elizabethan audience that Juliet was a character whose destiny was bound up with powerful forces of fate.

While either the earthquake or the Hallowe'en conception theory would seem to explain the business of precisely calculating Juliet's birthdate, and White's theory conceivably explains Shakespeare's choice of age, Shakespeare's reasons for putting such a central focus on Juliet's age, relative to his sources, are so far unclear. The imagery of the play already makes ample references to fate, and it seems simplistic to presume that the age of 13 was just another such allusion. Let us therefore now proceed to examine a number of other possibilities.

2. The Influence of Class Status on Juliet's Age

"Two Households Both Alike in Dignity. . ."

Belonging to a household with sufficient influence to provoke citywide feuds, Juliet Capulet is the (only) daughter of a powerful aristocratic family. Capulet's sense of urgency to marry off Juliet intensifies after Tybalt, the only other potential heir, is killed. There is also the matter of finding a suitable partner of like status to ally Juliet with. Paris is from the family of the Prince and is clearly a highly eligible bachelor. Due to the amount of money set to change hands at her marriage, the concern with finding an appropriate "gallant, young, and noble gentleman" (III.v.113), and the fact of her aristocratic status, it is likely that Juliet would be married off at a relatively young age.

Amongst the lower classes, brides often married around 24-27 and grooms around 26-30,⁴⁾ in order

that they would have the opportunity to accumulate skills and resources; not only for personal comfort, but to be considered economically competent in the eyes of the church, having “something gotten to maintain a wife, though not richly, yet sufficiently” (William Whately “*A Bride-Bush*”: *Or, Direction for Married Persons* (1623) cited in Ingram 1987: 130). At the other end of the social scale, aristocrats were more likely to marry their children at a young age due to larger property settlements and anxiety about possible wardship. Advantageous marriages were desirable in order to consolidate the holdings of both families, and, ideally, to move each family a little further up the status ladder.

Where more money was at stake, parents had more control as the threat of disinheritance was significant enough to encourage compliance, although compliance was presumably more easily obtained at a younger age. For children within the household, as opposed to young adults, there was much less opportunity for meeting potential partners independently of their parents and for contracting alliances without parental consent. William Cecil, Lord Burghley and ex-Chancellor of the Court of Wards, famously warned, “Marry thy daughters in time, lest they marry themselves” (cited in Emmison 1970–1980: 5).⁵ Similarly, Judge Swinburne warned that, while 14 for a boy and 12 for a girl may seem “over-tender,” delayed marriage might lead to immorality (cited in Hurstfield 1958: 153). A younger bride was more likely to have retained her virtue and was therefore a more marketable commodity.

Another motivation for marriages to be arranged while the heirs and heiresses of wealthy families were still young was the risk of wardship. Should the father die before the heir was of age, all property would be taken under the guardianship (and hence temporary ownership) of another aristocrat until the ward attained maturity—which for heiresses was set at 16, and for heirs at 21 (Hurstfield 1958: 137). This guardianship extended to arranging the marriage of the ward, with the

potential to unite the ward with a member of the guardian’s own family in order to take possession of the land on a permanent basis or, at least, to claim the dowry in the case of an heir’s marriage. However, the guardian only had these powers if no contract yet existed. An existing betrothal contract could not be broken by a guardian, meaning that the ward’s father could still have control of the marriage from beyond the grave. As approximately a third of children had lost one or more parents by the age of 21 (Laslett 1971: 93), the motivation to get children betrothed fairly young to avoid wardship must have been fairly pressing.⁶ For those heirs/heiresses unfortunate enough to fall into wardship, their guardian was also likely to marry them off at a fairly young age, before they passed out of wardship, in order to benefit from the property transactions involved.

However, while wealthy people certainly betrothed their children at a young age, even as “infants in swaddling clouts,” the confirmation of the marriage in terms of wedding ceremony and consummation usually took place later. An example of this would be the union of Arthur, first son of Henry VII, with Catherine of Aragon. They were betrothed in 1489, as part of the Treaty of Matino del Campo, when he was aged 3 and she was aged 4. However, they were not married until 1501, when Arthur was 14 and Catherine was nearly 16 (Pinches 1974: 135). They were still unusually young; average marriage ages for members of the upper class were around 20–22 for brides and 25–27 for grooms.⁷ However, Arthur and Catherine were royalty, not merely upper class. Presumably, the higher the status of the family, the more pressing the decisions of marital property transference would have been.

In order to compare Juliet’s age to the marriage ages of daughters in families in the uppermost echelons of society, I performed a survey of the average age at marriage of the rulers of England and their consorts since 1054, based on the genealogical data in Pinches’s (1974) *The Royal Heraldry of England*. Excluding remarriages, I

found that brides married on average at the age of 18.86 and grooms at the age of 24.95. This statistic corresponds fairly closely with a survey of marriages between members of titled families from 1600–1625, which found that noblewomen married at an average age of 19.39 and noblemen married around 24.28 (Laslett 1971: 83).⁸⁾

Table 2 Average Marriage Ages of Different Classes of Society

CLASS	BRIDE AGE	GROOM AGE
Working Class	24–27	26–30
Upper Class	20–22	25–27
Titled Nobles	19.39	24.28
English Royalty	18.86	24.95

While these statistics show that Romeo and Juliet married younger than average, that does not mean that their marriage was completely aberrant, as averages tend to mask instances of very early marriage. In 1897, F.J. Furnivall published a book called *Child Marriages, Divorces and Ratifications, etc.*, based on the records of Chester between 1561–1566, which included 30 cases of marriages occurring between parties under the age of 16. However, to put Furnivall’s findings in proportion, these 30 cases were drawn from around 10,000 records within that five-year period, meaning that the early marriages he found accounted for less than 1% of total records for Chester during that time (Young 1988: 460). An occurrence rate of early marriage (under 16) of less than 1% of all marriages was also found in a study of 1000 seventeenth century licences granted by the diocese of Canterbury (Laslett 1971: 81). In my survey of royal unions, the early marriage occurrence rate was significantly higher: 18.75% of the 32 brides were under the age of 16, 15.63% under the age of 14. While my sample was very small (32 marriages, including remarriages), the finding that a higher proportion of brides marry under the age of 16 among the upper echelons of society than among working class families is consistent with O’Day’s finding of a 12% rate of child marriages among the nobility from 1600–1659

(1994: 80).

Therefore, it was legally possible for brides to marry as young as Juliet and such marriages did occur, and were more likely amongst “ladies of esteem” (I.iii.72) than common people, although early marriage was still exceptional rather than normal. By making Juliet such a young bride, Shakespeare may be reflecting the occasional practice of very early marriage amongst the English aristocracy.

3. The Influence of an Italian Setting on Juliet’s Age

“In Fair Verona, Where We Lay Our Scene. . .”

Shakespeare was not going against tradition by laying his scene in Verona, as the story of Romeo and Juliet initially came from Italy, but the use of an Italian setting has a potential influence on the issue of marriage age. Italy held an exotic/erotic fascination for the English as a foreign place where fantastical things might occur. Climate theory led to beliefs about hot-blooded Italians, in whom “the urge to couple is as furious as the urge to quarrel” (Cook 1991: 129). Also, as a Catholic country, Italy may well have been perceived as backward in relation to new Protestant ideas of free choice in marriage.

The Elizabethan interest in foreign countries is reflected in the fact that, of Shakespeare’s 38 plays, only 11 are set in England (10 of these are English history plays), while 9 are set (or at least have scenes) in greater Italy (Levin 1993: 21). For an audience newly interested in “understanding the world in terms of travel, exploration, and geographical and cartographical description” (Kruse 1996: 30), Shakespeare supplies cultural details designed to create an intriguingly foreign landscape. His use of Italian names (e.g., Romeo), architecture (e.g., balconies), flora and fauna (e.g., pomegranates), and customs (e.g., fencing), invokes a sense of a country in which real details and the imaginary world are intertwined (Marrapodi 1993: 8).

In these ways, Shakespeare’s work bears some

resemblance to the travel writings of diarists such as George Sandys, Thomas Hoby and William Lithgow, who mythologised and sensationalised their experience of Italy for a fascinated audience of educated Elizabethans (Marrapodi 1993: 2).⁹ Braun's *Civitates Orbis Terrarum*, published some time between 1572–1618, may have been of assistance to Shakespeare (if it appeared at the earlier end of this range), providing two maps of Verona and describing it as a place “with an abundance of all things necessary not only for mortal survival but also for happiness and pleasure” (Kruse 1996: 32–33). Italy is thus set up in some ways as a utopia of prosperity and fertility, certainly a compelling fantasy world for an Elizabethan England recurrently decimated by plague. *Romeo and Juliet* contains a number of metaphors connecting the abundance of the flora and fauna with the nobility of Italy's women. Mercutio jokes bawdily about Romeo sitting under a medlar tree (II.i.34),¹⁰ and Capulet tells Paris “let two more summers wither in their pride / Ere we shall think her ripe to be a bride” (I.ii.10–11), implicitly connecting the fertility of the landscape with Juliet's potential as a mother.

However, not all of the associations with Italy were positive. Climate theory was founded on the assumption “that the climate of a particular region profoundly affected the appearance, character and temperament of its inhabitants” (Hoenselaars 1993: 39). Italy fell into the “hot” region and was therefore considered a place where “all passion is at the boil—choler, rage, revenge, grief” (Cook 1991: 129). Benvolio warns Mercutio that the “hot days” are stirring their “mad blood” (III.i.4) and when Capulet rages against Juliet, Lady Capulet scolds him for being “too hot” (III.v.175). While being “hot” is interpreted as having uncontrolled anger, libidos are also at boiling point. The connection between violence and passion is created at the beginning of the play when the Montague servants boast about killing Capulet men and raping Capulet women (I.i.15–23). Such stereotypes of violent, sensual Italians were

perhaps also created and reinforced in the British mind by the work of Machiavelli and the “lurid stories of deceit, intrigue, jealousy and passion” of such Italian writers and dramatists as Bandello, Aretino, Cinthio and Guarini (Marrapodi 1993: 3). Beliefs about the ready availability of poison and assassins plotting gruesome deaths for their opponents further reinforced negative assumptions about the Italian temperament.

Compared to Protestant England, Catholic Italy is shown as backward in its attitudes to marriage, with the authoritarian Capulet threatening disinheritance and violence to his disobedient daughter if she continues to refuse to marry the man of his choice (III.v.161–168, 190–194). While it is questionable how aware Shakespeare was of the actual conditions in Italy, it is true that laws regarding the requirement of parental consent were more draconian in Italy than in England. In Padua in 1420, the punishment for a daughter who had not gained parental consent before marrying was “loss of dowry and thirty days' imprisonment on bread and water,” while a son could be fined and subjected to a year's imprisonment (Dean 1998: 91). This became even more severe under the Catholic Emperor Charles V, who decreed that marriages without parental consent should be punished with death for the man (classifying all intercourse outside of consummation of parentally consented marriage as rape and decreeing the same punishment) and confiscation of dowry for the woman (Dean 1998: 91). However, while laws requiring parental consent were more draconian, Italian laws relating to minimum marriage age were the same as those in England. Marriage statistics for Italian couples seem to show that brides married around 18 years old on average (Young 1988: 461), four or so years older than Juliet.

As a bride in Italy, Juliet is part of a cultural fantasy emphasising exoticism and abundance. As such, it is possible that her age at marriage is reduced from the sources to emphasise her otherness from English culture and marital

practices. Descriptions of Italy in the writings of diarists and geographers are full of images of abundance and fruitfulness, which Shakespeare extends to relate to the nubility of Italian women. As an Italian, Juliet is a member of a culture viewed as hot blooded and passionate. Juliet is simultaneously virginal and sensual, a very erotic combination. Such beliefs about Italy provide possible reasons for Juliet's youthfulness.

4. The Influence of Aristocratic Feuds on Juliet's Age

*"From Ancient Grudge Break to New Mutiny
Where Civil Brawls Make Civil Hands
Unclean. . ."*

The houses of Capulet and Montague are set up as powerful forces of influence within Verona, capable of engendering "civil brawls" (I.i.82). The feud between these houses could conceivably have been based on tensions in genuine Italian social structures, which involved all the positions of public office being divided among a minority of "premier lineages" (Molho 1994: 198). However, factional politics were not uniquely Italian. Feuds between aristocratic families (some of which were over marriages), and their destructive consequences, would have been familiar to Elizabethans. In fact, Henry VII, Henry VIII and Elizabeth I had all had to issue proclamations against the kind of street fights the Capulets and Montagues engage in (Stone 1965: 229-232). There were conflicts enough to present Shakespeare with ample examples of aristocratic feuds to analogise in his story of *Romeo and Juliet*.

If Shakespeare had had a specific contemporary real world English feud in mind, a possibility could be the conflict between the Thynne family and the Marvin family. The following account of the feud is summarised from A. D. Wall's (1983) *Two Elizabethan Women: Correspondence of Joan and Maria Thynne, 1575-1611* (xvi-xxviii). Wall suggests that the first event in the Thynne-Marvin feud may have been the arrest of Sir John Thynne of Longleat (in 1549 and again in 1551) by Mr.

Marvin, sheriff of Wiltshire, after his patron, Protector Somerset, was sent to the Tower. Any existing enmity was then aggravated by the 1574 collapse of marriage negotiations between John Thynne (junior) and Lucy, daughter of Sir James Marvin of Fonthill, because Thynne (senior) thought Marvin was trying to cheat him over the matter of Lucy's dowry lands. As a result of this dispute, Thynne and Marvin became very bitter enemies, involving many of Wiltshire's landed families in their ongoing feud. This feud climaxed in 1589, with violent confrontations at the Assizes and Quarter Sessions, resulting in suits to the Star Chamber. Enough conflict, at any rate, to qualify as an "ancient grudge" (I.i.3).

The similarity between the Thynne/Marvin feud and the story of *Romeo and Juliet* is particularly apparent in relation to the secret marriage between 16 year old Thomas Thynne (younger brother of John) and 16 year old Maria Marvin. Thomas met Maria on 16 May 1594, at the Bell Inn at Beaconsfield in Buckinghamshire, while he was on his way to London. The two talked with each other and were married later that same evening, with the encouragement of Maria's mother. They spent the night together (although whether or not consummation occurred was a matter of dispute), then parted, and kept their marriage a secret all the following year. In the meantime, the feud between the families became more bitter over the killing of Henry Long (a relative of the Thynne family), by the Danvers brothers of Dauntsey (members of the Marvin faction). When the marriage came to light in late 1595 it was a matter of great public interest. A suit over the validity of the secret marriage commenced in the Court of Arches early in 1597, continuing until 1601, when the legality of the match was finally affirmed, although John Thynne continued to bitterly condemn Thomas's elopement (Wall 1983: xvi-xxviii).

There are a number of aspects of the Thynne-Marvin feud that suggest it was a possible precedent for *Romeo and Juliet*. There are obvious plot similarities in the stories of a pair of teenagers

from opposed families marrying secretly, followed by the death of a male relation as a result of the feud. The occurrence of such a similar story around the date of Shakespeare's play seems more than pure coincidence. The first published version of his text, Q1: *An Excellent Conceited Tragedie of Romeo and Juliet: As it hath been often (and with great applause) plaid publicquely, by the right Honourable the L. of Hunsdon his Seruants*, appeared in 1597 (Levenson 2000: 97), two years after the marriage came to light and the same year that the court case began. Shakespeare's patron at the time, Lord Chamberlain Hunsdon, was "closely connected with the Thynnes" and may have been "eager to see a play on the evil consequences of feuding: as propaganda which might discourage highly placed families such as the Thynnes from engaging in it" (Wall 1983: xxvii). If there was a connection between the Thynne-Marvin story and Shakespeare's play, it would present Shakespeare with a contemporary precedent for unusually young marriage. Thomas and Maria were 16 at the time they eloped so, if Shakespeare was writing about them, he was writing about teenagers. However, while Romeo may have been 16 or older, Juliet is unequivocally 13 going on 14. So, even if Juliet is associated with Maria Marvin, Shakespeare chose to further lower her age.

5. The Influence of the Generation Gap between the Characters on Juliet's Age

"From Forth the Fatal Loins of These Two Foes. . ."

Shakespeare's Verona is a world where households are turned against each other and in which the households are divided against themselves, with a lack of understanding between the older and younger generations. This gap becomes an abyss when the dramatist exaggerates the difference between the generations by making the adults more elderly and the young more childlike.

To some extent, the two generations take opposite sides in the ideological argument between arranged and chosen marriage, with the older

generation espousing traditional values and beliefs and the younger generation challenging those beliefs with radical new ideas of choice. Although Capulet initially seems full of concern for Juliet when he expresses reluctance to agree to her being married before the age of 16 (I.ii.9-11), and speaks like a Protestant parent when he tells Paris that "my will to her consent is but a part" (I.ii.15), when his will is challenged he reacts like the stereotypical authoritarian patriarch less concerned with his daughter's feelings than with his own pride (III.v.161-168, 190-194). However, this ideological gap seems to be more like a conflict between two characters than the issue dividing older and younger people in the play. Capulet is the only character to take such a clear stance on the issue of chosen and arranged marriage. Most of the other adult characters do not express opinions one way or the other, and the Friar and the Nurse are two members of the older generation who seem to support the young people's ideas. On the other side of the gap, Paris seems quite happy to participate in an enforced match.

However, if the fracture between generations is interpreted as lack of understanding of the young, rather than ideological difference, the divide is more absolute. The Friar and Nurse both fail to support their charges adequately through not understanding the intensity of their feelings, which places the two of them back on the adult side of the divide. Lord and Lady Montague, who do not express views either for or against chosen marriage, are shown at the beginning of the play as unable to understand their own son; asking Benvolio to interpret for them (I.i.140-152). And it is certain that Lord and Lady Capulet (who are both clearly on the other side of the ideological divide from Juliet) do not understand their daughter, and only actually consult her opinion after acting on their own, feeling confident that she will comply with their wishes.¹¹⁾

The divide which is created between the two generations by this lack of understanding is exaggerated by emphasising how elderly the older

generation are and how youthful the younger generation are. At the beginning of the play, Lords Capulet and Montague are made to look ridiculous by trying to join in a foray with younger men. Lady Capulet mocks her husband “A crutch, a crutch—why call you for a sword?” (I.i.69). After the battle, Capulet extends this inference of age to Montague: “’tis not hard, I think,/For men so old as we to keep the peace” (I.ii.2–3). Capulet is called “Old Capulet” twice in the text (I.i.83, II.iii.6), and twice in the stage directions of the second quarto (III.iv, IV.iv), while Montague is designated “Old Montague” once in the text (I.i.70), and twice in the stage directions of the second quarto (I.i, III.i) (Hosley 1967: 3). We are even given an approximate reckoning of how old they were. A conversation between Capulet and his cousin at the ball reveals that it has been “thirty years” (I.v.32) since they were “in a masque” (I.v.31), i.e., since they were unmarried men. If they had married in their mid-20s, at the average age for young men of the upper class, this would make them around 50 in *Romeo and Juliet*.

The precise ages of Shakespeare’s other adult characters are less precisely indicated, but they are described by themselves and others as old. In the Friar’s first scene with Romeo, he groups himself with sleepless old men (II.ii.35–36), and says that Romeo’s groans for Rosaline “yet ring in mine ancient ears” (II.ii.74). In the final act of the play, he complains that his “old feet” stumble over the graves on his way to the vault (V.iii.122) and, when he later makes full confession to the Prince, he expresses his willingness that “my old life/Be sacrificed” (V.iii.266–67). The Nurse similarly seems old. When she goes to deliver Juliet’s message to Romeo, Mercutio teases her, calling her an “ancient lady” (II.iii.128). While Juliet waits impatiently for the Nurse to return from this errand, she blames the Nurse’s tardiness on her being in the category of “old folks” who are “unwieldy, slow, heavy, and pale as lead” (II.iv.16, 17). When the Nurse gets back, she delays telling Juliet Romeo’s reply, complaining “Fie, how my

bones ache” (II.iv.26). Later, when she brings Juliet less happy news, of Tybalt’s death, she complains that “these griefs, these woes, these sorrows make me old” (III.ii.88). On the other hand, the Nurse talks of having had a daughter, Susan, who had presumably been born around the same time as Juliet, making the Nurse available to act as Juliet’s wet-nurse (I.iii.20–21, 26–29). As such, the Nurse must have been of childbearing age fourteen years ago and so capable of breast-feeding at that time. This calculation perhaps suggests that the Nurse is in later middle age, late 40s or 50s, although this is inconsistent with her frequent references to her old age and with a theatrical tradition which generally makes the Nurse quite elderly.

The issue of childbearing also complicates the issue of the age of Lady Capulet, for whom there is similarly conflicting evidence. On the one hand, she is referred to by the designation of “Old Lady” six times in the speech headings of the second quarto (I.iii.49, 63, 69, 77, 79, and 96) (Hosley 1967: 3), and, like the Nurse, says that sorrow makes her feel old: the sight of death in Act V is “as a bell/that warns my old age to a sepulchre” (V.iii.205–06). On the other hand, Lady Capulet tells Juliet, “I was your mother much upon these years/That you are now a maid” (I.iii.74–75). Taken literally, this would mean that Lady Capulet was a mother at 13/14, meaning that at the time of the play she is around 28. This calculation has been accepted by some critics, along with the ideas that “Capulet is an old man married to a young woman” (John E. Hankins cited in Hosley 1967: 5), and that Lady Capulet’s youthfulness as a mother led to miscarriage,¹² possibly affecting Capulet’s subsequent concerns about youthful marriage (I.ii.13). If this was the case, the 28 year old Lady Capulet might seem more on the side of the youthful generation than the old. Charles Knight suggested that this inconsistency might have arisen from a compositor’s error, meaning that instead of Lady Capulet saying “I was *your* mother, much upon these years/That you are now a maid” (I.iii.74–76), the text should actually

read “I was *a* mother, much upon these years/ That you are now a maid” (Hosley 1967: 6). While most modern versions read “I was your mother,” Knight’s theory would allow for Lady Capulet to have married around 14 years of age, as she states, but for Juliet not to have been Lady Capulet’s first child, although the only one to survive. The warning against young marriage and childbirth is preserved, but this reading allows for Lady Capulet to be in her 30s or 40s, clearly allied with the older generation. Another possibility is that “much upon these years” is an exaggeration intended to console Juliet, meaning that Lady Capulet actually married later than Juliet’s 13/14. At any rate, despite the question of her chronological age, Lady Capulet’s status as a parent clearly aligns her with the older generation, and it seems unlikely that an audience would be confused on this issue.

The younger generation are made younger not only by the decrease in their chronological age from the sources, but also by placing them in the role of children in relation to their parents. Juliet’s first appearance is as a child within the Capulet household. Scene I.iii, in which Lady Capulet and the Nurse discuss marriage with Juliet, is an innovation of Shakespeare’s, and has no precedent in Brooke (Evans 1984: 9). In this introduced scene, Shakespeare foregrounds Juliet’s “age, her status as an only child and heir, her suitability for betrothal, and her condition of total dependency on her parents” (Levenson 2000: 19). While Brooke’s Nurse reminisced about Juliet’s babyhood for seven lines (ll. 652–58), Shakespeare’s Nurse prattles on for thirty-five (I.iii.25–50, 52–59, 61–64). The Nurse’s extended reminiscence serves to draw attention to Juliet as a child, simultaneously emphasising her innocence and drawing attention to her latent sexuality. This parallel occurs several times during the scene. At the beginning, the Nurse calls for her “ladybird” (I.iii.3), which was concurrently a term of endearment and jargon for a prostitute (Levenson 2000: 171n.), and she recounts three times the anecdote of Juliet falling on her face along with a bawdy joke about falling

on her back, i.e., into the traditional (missionary) position for women during intercourse (I.iii.40–46, 49–50, 52–59). While Lady Capulet is trying to persuade Juliet of the prudence of a match with Paris, the Nurse is trying to tempt her to “seek happy nights to happy days” (I.iii.107).

The discussion of the prospect of Juliet’s marriage leads both Lady Capulet and the Nurse to reminisce about their own attainments of womanhood, giving “the impression of an uninterrupted cycle of birth and nurturance carried on from mother to daughter, under the approving eyes of fathers and husbands” (Kahn 1980: 183). As mentioned above, Lady Capulet talks about becoming a mother for the first time (I.iii.74–75). However, the Nurse’s recollections are not so sedate. Her first line is an oath, “by my maidenhead at twelve year old” (I.iii.2), suggesting that this was the age at which she lost her virginity. Interestingly, Shakespeare has decreased this age from Brooke’s version in which the Nurse confesses, “At sixtene yeres I first did choose my loving feere,/And I was fully ripe before, (I dare well say) a yere” (ll. 697–98). In the Brooke version, Juliet is 16, the age at which Brooke’s Nurse lost her virginity; in Shakespeare, Juliet is 13 and the Nurse was 12 when she lost her virginity. So, in both, the Nurse loses her virginity at almost exactly the same age as Juliet, creating a contrast between the Nurse’s “‘grotesque’ body, with its four teeth and over-sucked dugs” and that of the virginal Juliet (Callaghan 2001: 104). These connections again serve to create a picture of Juliet as a child on the verge of her own sexuality.

Just as Juliet’s first appearance is within the context of her family, Romeo is first mentioned by his parents. After establishing that he was not involved in the fighting, they express concern about his antisocial behaviour at home (I.i.109–152). Romeo is still under the parental roof (although to a lesser extent than Juliet): he follows Mercutio and Benvolio to dinner at his father’s house (II.iii.126), and asks Balthasar to take a letter to his father, in which he explains his

suicide (V.iii.24). Although Romeo spends little time with his parents, he is positioned as junior in the context of the pupil-mentor relationship that he has with Friar Lawrence. Friar Lawrence calls him “pupil mine” (II.ii.82) and it is possible that this has been their literal relationship. It was not unusual for the clergy to oversee the education of young aristocrats.

Romeo’s youth is a recurring image in the play. When describing to Benvolio his failed attempts at gaining Rosaline’s favours, Romeo says that “from love’s weak childish bow she lives unharmed” (I.i.204). While this can be interpreted in reference to Cupid as the child archer, it also draws attention to the “childish” nature of Romeo’s affection for Rosaline. When Romeo is persuaded to attend the Capulets’ ball to forget his sorrows, Capulet terms him “Young Romeo” (I.v.61) and says of Romeo’s reputation that “Verona brags of him/To be a virtuous and well-governed youth” (I.v.64–65). When Romeo encounters the Friar the morning after meeting Juliet, the Friar calls him “Young son” (II.ii.33), and reprimands his change of affections with the comment, “young men’s love then lies/Not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes” (II.ii.67–68). When the Nurse comes looking for Romeo to arrange an assignation with Juliet, she asks, “Can anyone tell me where I may find the young Romeo?” (II.iii.105–06) and he replies cheekily, “young Romeo will be older when you have found him than he was when you sought him. I am the youngest of that name” (II.iii.107–09). Romeo’s youthfulness is used against him in an insulting way by Tybalt who calls him “boy” on two occasions (III.i.61, 125), although this may be an expression of contempt rather than literally meaning “young man.” Romeo calls Paris a “youth” and a “boy” in similar circumstances, when they clash outside Juliet’s tomb (V.iii.59, 61, 70, 84, 99), which may likewise be intended to impugn his manhood rather than comment on his chronological age.

Shakespeare may have made his lovers more youthful in order to accentuate the lack of

understanding between the older and younger generations. He emphasises their youth by portraying them as children within the context of their families and by repeatedly reiterating that Romeo is young. As such, the age of Shakespeare’s lovers seems not to be an extraneous detail but of central importance to a tragedy caused by lack of understanding and miscommunication.

6. The Influence of the Themes on Juliet’s Age

“A Pair of Star-Crossed Lovers Take Their Life”

The premature deaths of Romeo and Juliet give their fate pathos, while their ages excuse them from full responsibility for their actions. This gives their love a purity and ethereal quality, setting up their romance as an ideal form of love, transcending normal courtship by preceding it.

Whereas Bandello wrote his story as a cautionary tale to “warn young people that they should govern their desires and not run into furious passion” (Bullough 1957: 271), and Brooke criticised the lovers for “thralling themselves to dishonest desire, neglecting the authority and advise of parents and friends [. . .] abusing the honorable name of lawfull marriage [by clandestinity]” (Bullough 1957: 284–285), the actions of Shakespeare’s lovers are not merely condoned but rather interpreted as proof of the power of their love. Despite the fact that, between them, they “violate their parents’ trust, engage in a hasty and clandestine marriage, murder a couple of noblemen, break half a dozen or more laws and commit both seeming and genuine suicide” (Cook 1991: 128), they are portrayed not as sinners but as martyrs. At the end of the play, “Death timelessly joins what in a temporal world was consumed even as it united” (Gray 1968: 64), making their love heavenly and spiritual (and therefore beyond sexual), despite the fact that Christian doctrine would have condemned them to hell for the mortal sin of suicide (Hibbard 1987: 162n.). Instead, their deaths have a redemptive quality for their families, the feud is dissolved and the lovers are to

be immortalised in statues made of pure gold as a permanent reminder of the ideal of love (Gray 1968: 65).

The prematurity of the deaths of Romeo and Juliet is heightened by recurring imagery of haste.¹³⁾ Whereas Brooke's lovers have been married for several months before Romeo's banishment for Tybalt's death separates them, Shakespeare intensifies the romance by reducing the time the couple have together after their marriage to a single night, during which they are already aware they must part, perhaps forever. By having Juliet express her sensual anticipation earlier in the play (III.ii.1-31), but then removing any hint of bawdry from the consummation of the lovers, Shakespeare both eroticizes and sanctifies their union. Part of the purity of Romeo and Juliet's love stems from the fact that they are "a pair of stainless maidenhoods" (III.ii.13). Despite Romeo's earlier crush on Rosaline, she was "in strong proof of chastity well armed" (I.i.203), i.e. he was not successful in seducing her, and so was presumably still a virgin. In contrast to Juliet's proposed marriage with Paris, her union with Romeo is free from all mercenary considerations. Juliet says "my true love is grown to such excess/I cannot sum up some of half my wealth" (II.v.33-34), valuing her love more dearly than the financial gain she could receive from a match with Paris.

The extreme youth of Romeo and Juliet seems to serve as an excuse for their actions, making them paragons rather than pariahs. The brevity of their relationship prevents the lovers from having to deal with practical considerations or the consequences of their actions, and gives their motivations simplicity and purity. Their youthfulness sets them apart from normal society and makes their love exceptional.

7. Conclusion

It seems, then, that Shakespeare may have had many motivations to write a play about two young people in love, with a greater focus on their youthfulness than we find in his predecessors.

However, some of the influences I have discussed seem more plausible than others.

Romeo and Juliet is not the only Shakespeare play featuring aristocratic characters, but it is the only one in which romance occurs between characters so explicitly close to the minimum legal marriage age. Aristocratic marriage most commonly appears in Shakespeare's history plays, but even here Shakespeare is not beyond changing the ages of his characters to suit his dramatic purposes. For example, Richard II married his second wife, Isabel, in 1396, when he was 29 and she was 7 (Pinches 1974: 63). However, in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, he actually *increases* the age of Richard's queen from a child to an adult, in order that she can be a more convincing tragic character when they are separated in V.i. Shakespeare's aristocrats, even his royal characters, are not uniformly young, so it seems unlikely that the fact that Romeo and Juliet were aristocratic would be sufficient motivation for Shakespeare to emphasise the youth of his lovers.

Romeo and Juliet is not the only Shakespeare play featuring Italian characters, but it is the only one that focuses on characters so explicitly close to the minimum legal marriage age. Nine of Shakespeare's plays have scenes set in Italy and yet, while the majority of these plays are romances and involve the main characters getting married, *Romeo and Juliet* is the only play focusing on such explicitly young characters. Therefore, although the Italian setting contributes significantly to the details of the play, it is not sufficient motivation for Shakespeare to emphasise the youth of his lovers.

While there seems to be a very close correlation between the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* and the feud between the Thynnes and the Marvins, Brooke was definitely Shakespeare's main source for the play and already contained all the main events of the plot. What is plausible, however, is that the publicity surrounding the teen marriage and/or the links between Shakespeare's patron and the Thynnes may have prompted Shakespeare to choose to write *Romeo and Juliet* at this particular

time. But, even if this was the case, his heroine was still younger than Maria's 16. Therefore, the feud between the Thynnes and the Marvins may have influenced the timing of Shakespeare's play, but is not sufficient motivation for Shakespeare's choice of age for his lovers.

The portrayal of Romeo and Juliet as children within the households of their parents is more a more unique feature of this text. In no other Shakespearean play do his lovers both have a full set of parents.¹⁴ This seems highly significant, particularly as Shakespeare has increased the emphasis on Juliet as a child within her parents household by introducing I.iv, which had no precedent in Brooke. The fact that Romeo and Juliet are children within the households of their parents effects the themes of the play in a number of ways. As discussed, making the young characters more youthful and the adult characters more elderly widens the gap in understanding between the two generations. The feud between their parents forces Romeo and Juliet to make a difficult choice to be together, making their love seem more powerful. Had they not been set within the context of feuding households, their divided loyalties might not have been so apparent. Juliet's precise age takes on some significance for, had she been older than 13, it might have been less believable that falling in love with Romeo was her very first rebellion against her parents wishes. Romeo and Juliet had to be young in order to be at the stage in their lives when they were just beginning to be independent from their parents, as otherwise their choice to be together would not have seemed so enormous.

The youthful innocence of Romeo and Juliet is central to the portrayal of their love as pure and their actions as justified. They lack the complexity of Shakespeare's more mature lovers, such as Kate and Petruchio, or Beatrice and Benedict. They are free from self-doubt and from audience condemnation for their actions. Such single-mindedness and naiveté might be less believable if it were not coming from the mouths of babes. The

fact that Romeo and Juliet are such young lovers is essential for their story to be convincing.

It seems, then, that Shakespeare has used the inherited elements of the play—the plot set out for him by Brooke, the aristocratic status of his characters and the Italian setting—to give his story depth and detail. The Thynne and Marvin feud may well have given his story contemporary relevance. But none of these factors provides sufficient explanation for Shakespeare's emphasis on the youthfulness of Romeo and Juliet. It seems most likely that this decision was most closely related to his dramatic purposes. By setting his lovers within the context of their parents' households, he forces them to choose between family loyalties and their love for each other, and shows the effect of their choice through the grief of their parents over their tragic and immature deaths. The pathos of their deaths and the innocence of their love is intensified by their youthfulness, which also serves to minimise their responsibility for their actions. By making the audience so aware of Romeo and Juliet's exceptional youth, Shakespeare makes their love and their lives all the more fragile. By pushing the boundaries of marriage age with his characters, Shakespeare is pushing the tragedy of the events of the plot out to their most dramatic extent.

Notes

- 1) For actual marriage age statistics, see Table 2.
- 2) I have come across a variety of spellings for "Boiastuau," but will be using Bullough's spelling, as Bullough has been my main point of reference for source materials across my three case studies.
- 3) See pp. 28–30 for a discussion of indicators of Romeo's age in Shakespeare's text.
- 4) These age ranges incorporate the results of several studies reported by Ingram (1987: 129) and Young (1988: 460).
- 5) That said, in relation to a suit for one of his own daughters, Burghley said that "she shold not, with my lykyng, be marryed before she war neare xviii or xx" (cited in Palliser 1992: 47).
- 6) An extreme example of this is the case of

Alexander Osbaldiston who was married to Margaret Hothersall “three or four days before the death of his father.” At the time, “the boy was under eleven years of age and the girl six or seven; she was ‘partly borne in arms and partly led’ to the church” (primary documents cited in Hurstfield 1958: 152).

- 7) These ranges are based on studies reported on by Cook (1977: 127), Laslett (1971: 83), Stone (1977: 46), and Young (1988: 461).
- 8) From 1625–1650 these averages went up to 20.67 for noblewomen and 25.99 for noblemen (Laslett 1971: 83).
- 9) It has been proposed that Shakespeare may have himself travelled to Italy, with the Earl of Southampton in 1593, but evidence for this is inconclusive (Locatelli 1993: 79).
- 10) A fruit thought to resemble the female sexual organ, with a play on “meddle” in the sense of “to have sexual intercourse with” (Greenblatt, Cohen, Howard, & Maus 1997: 890n).
- 11) In I.ii Capulet agrees to allow Paris to court Juliet, but she is not consulted about it until I.iii. Later in the play, although Juliet has refused marriage in III.v, Capulet is continuing to make plans for the wedding at the beginning of IV.ii before her return from seeing Friar Lawrence at line 17 brings a show of repentance.
- 12) Q2 contains the line “Earth hath swallowed all my hopes but she” (I.ii.13+1).
- 13) In the balcony scene, Juliet realises that the love between herself and Romeo is “too rash, too unadvis’d, too sudden” (II.i.160). Waiting impatiently for the Nurse to return from meeting with Romeo, Juliet wants “Love’s heralds” to be as swift as “thoughts” (II.iv.4) and then on her return the Nurse responds to Juliet’s excitement by exclaiming “Jesu, what haste!” (II.iv.29). Romeo, persuading the Friar to marry them, pleads “I stand on sudden haste” to which the Friar warns “Wisely and slow, they stumble that run fast” (II.ii.93, 94).
- 14) A number of Shakespeare’s other plays show his heroine within her parents’ household (*Titus Andronicus*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, *Hamlet*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Tempest*), but even amongst

these plays a mother is rarely present (with the exception of brief appearances in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Pericles*, and an evil stepmother in *Cymbeline*). It is considerably more unusual for a hero to be shown within the context of his household (which only occurs in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Hamlet*, *All’s Well That Ends Well*, *Coriolanus*, and *The Winter’s Tale*), which also usually feature only one parent.

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