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Tara Lynn Hohn

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Shakespeare’s Deviation from His Predecessors:

Aligning *Romeo and Juliet* with Italian Renaissance Marriage Culture

Tara Hohn
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Douglas Lanier
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Shakespeare’s Deviation from His Predecessors: Aligning *Romeo and Juliet* with Italian Renaissance Marriage Culture

Contrary to popular belief, *Romeo and Juliet* (1595–1596) is not an original creation from Shakespeare’s imagination. It is instead based on Arthur Brooke’s *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* (1562), a narrative poem that serves as the earliest English translation of the famous folktale.\(^1\) By the time Shakespeare’s version of the story was first published in an unauthorized quarto in 1597,\(^2\) many of the inhabitants of Elizabethan England were already familiar with at least one of the variations of this tragic tale,\(^3\) whether that be Brooke’s or those of his reported inspirations, namely Matteo Bandello’s Italian *Novelle* (1554) and Pierre Boaistuau’s French translation (1559) involving the characters of Reomeo Titensus and Juliet Bibleotet. Although there are several variations of the folktale prior to the 1590s, it is indisputable that Brooke’s *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* is the primary source from which Shakespeare based *Romeo and Juliet* on, opposed to any other versions or adaptations.\(^4\) As many literary historians note, the similarities between the two works prove that Brooke’s version acts as the basis for that of Shakespeare’s. Conversely, by analyzing the differences between the works, it becomes clear that Shakespeare, more so than Brooke and other predecessors, incorporated and expounded upon aspects of Italian Renaissance marriage culture in *Romeo and Juliet*, a play set in Verona, Italy, sometime during the fourteenth century.\(^5\)

Although Shakespeare does alter and add certain elements within *Romeo and Juliet*, the foundational content from *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* remains in place. In every version of the tale, including those of Brooke and Shakespeare, the plot points surrounding the lovers’ romance and marriage endures throughout generations. Jill Levenson, the honorary vice president of the International Shakespeare Association, asserts that “the sequence of the
Romeo and Juliet narrative consists of twelve incidents,” the principal ones pertaining to their romance and marriage being “the Capulet feast, where Romeo and Juliet first encounter each other and immediately become enamored; the meeting at Juliet’s house when they plan to marry; the carrying out of these plans with the assistance of a friar;...Romeo and Juliet’s leave-taking of each other; the Capulets’ arrangement for Juliet to marry a man of their choice;...the scene in the tomb, where both lovers die” (328-329). Just as the chief “incidents” in Brooke and Shakespeare’s tales remain the same, so do several lines, phrases, concepts, and characters—some of which Shakespeare develops further—mirror each other in the two works. Geoffrey Bullough explains how “*Romeo and Juliet* affords more instances than usual...[of] a long list of lines or phrases echoing or approximating to [*The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*]” (387). He backs this claim with a specific example when he states, “It seems likely that the holding of hands in Brooke... [when] she took Romeo’s ‘tender palme’ in her own ‘tender hand’ gave rise to the ‘palmer-palm’ conceits with which the lovers play” (388). The words of Brooke (“[then Juliet] with tender hand his tender palm hath pressed...,”10) undeniably influenced those of Shakespeare (“And palm to palm is holy palmer’s kiss”11).

Even though *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* was a foundation for *Romeo and Juliet*, it acted as “a springboard”12 for Shakespeare’s imagination since he further developed or altogether changed many of the elements in Brooke’s version. In fact, “further [versions of] the story in England between 1567 and 1595 testify that the fable circulated among the Elizabethans fundamentally unchanged until Shakespeare transformed it”13. Shakespeare’s transfigured version of *Romeo and Juliet* may diverge from its predecessors, yet in doing so, Shakespeare brought the story closer to the customs of the Italian Renaissance period in which the play is set. There are three major modifications within *Romeo and Juliet* that make the play
more historically accurate to the marriage mores present in Italy during the fourteenth century: Juliet’s age, Capulet’s arrangement for Juliet to wed Paris, and the consummation of the lovers’ marriage. By making these alterations to the Romeo and Juliet narrative, Shakespeare aligns the play with the marriage practices of the Italian Renaissance even more than those exercised in Elizabethan England.

I. Upper Class Italian Culture

In Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare showcases Italian Renaissance culture, especially in terms of marriage practices. However, he primarily focuses on how upper class Italians navigate and adhere to the social customs of the Italian Renaissance. Romeo and Juliet, the protagonists of the play, both hail from powerful, wealthy Veronese families, the Montagues and the Capulets. Romeo and Juliet disregard their familial feud and parents’ orders, essentially choosing love over wealth and power. Nonetheless, the young lovers are both members of the upper echelon, which is the reason why their relationship is all the more scandalous and socially unacceptable. Through their secret wedding, the couple manages to subvert the restrictive upper class marriage customs that have been thrust upon them due to their elevated social status. Apart from the lovers and their families, there are several ordinary characters, such as Romeo’s friends, the Nurse, Friar Laurence, and servants, who do not play as large of roles as their wealthy counterparts. The poorer characters act as vehicles to convey the cultural customs and roles of lower class Italians, but many of the chief events, such as familial feuds, feasts, and arranged marriages, are spurred by the elites, thus establishing an upper class cultural framework to the play. Without the
influence of the elites, none of the play’s key plot points or conflicts would have been able to transpire.

In actual Italian Renaissance society, the upper class citizens undeniably exerted the most influence, economically, socially, and politically, even though the vast majority of the population was lower class. According to David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch’s analysis of the 1427 Florentine Catasto, the Italian system of land registration, “the richest one percent of the population possessed only one-sixth of the total wealth of the state—an extraordinarily low concentration as compared to what we know about other places”\(^{14}\) during the Renaissance. This number may be low compared to those of upper class wealth accumulation in other regions, but nonetheless, it shows that the wealthiest Italians did possess a fair amount of wealth, far more than the poorest citizens. By the mid-fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries, the “fluidity of social status was rapidly solidifying...into a well-defined hierarchy of wealthy patriciates, middle class merchants, and the poor urban proletariat,”\(^{15}\) the latter group accounting for most of the population. Throughout the entirety of Renaissance Europe, including Italy, “peasants made up the overwhelming mass of the third estate—they constituted 85 to 90 percent of the total European population,” with the exception of “the heavily urban areas of northern Italy.”\(^{16}\)

Although the poor constituted most of the Italian population during the Renaissance, but instead, Shakespeare chose to center his play on upper class characters and their interpersonal dilemmas with other members of the same class. For instance, the Capulets feud with the Montagues; Juliet argues with her parents after she rejects her arranged marriage to Paris; and Romeo and Juliet betray their families, marry, and eventually commit suicide. These three major struggles all involve upper class characters, while the lower class characters merely provide input or lend a helping hand along the way. The non-elite characters rarely engage in their own
conflicts, other than when Mercutio loses his life dueling with Tybalt. Even so, the fight between Mercutio and Tybalt stems from the broader Montague and Capulet feud. Shakespeare’s choice to give the ordinary characters supporting roles pushes their relationships, interests, and conflicts to the rear, while those of the elite are front and center.

Shakespeare’s emphasis on upper class Italians rather than their lower class counterparts does not detract from the fact that during the Italian Renaissance, both the wealthy and poor had similar motivations in the realm of marriage. To Italians of all classes, marriage acted as a business transaction, a way to elevate one’s socioeconomic status in society. In short, “arranged marriages were the rule [and] there could be no marriage without a dowry, regardless of class.”

Rich Italians may have possessed larger dowries and held much grander wedding processions compared to those in the lower class, but nonetheless, the economic purpose of marriage remained uniform across all classes. Additionally, the average age of marriage for all Italian girls remained relatively the same. For instance, one case study in Florence found that “rich girls and poor girls married for the first time at nearly the same ages—17.9 and 18.4 years respectively. Rich girls tended to be slightly younger, perhaps because their worried fathers wanted to settle their fates as quickly as possible.” Overall, “almost all Florentinian brides...were remarkably young, at least by modern standards.” During the Italian Renaissance, the amount of wealth and power varied across families and individuals, but the purpose of marriage, the necessity of a dowry, and the average female age at marriage remained consistent.

II. Juliet’s Age
One of Shakespeare’s more blatant departures from Brooke’s version is Juliet’s age. In *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*, Brooke says that Juliet “scarce saw...[a] full sixteen years: too young to be a bride!” Brooke’s exclamation that a girl who has just turned sixteen is far too young to be married off, especially to a much older man, is in accordance with Elizabethan marriage norms. By contrast, in *Romeo and Juliet*, the young daughter of Capulet is described multiple times by her parents and the Nurse as being thirteen, and only on “Lammas Eve at night shall she be fourteen” (1.3.19). Not only does Capulet state Juliet’s age, he also initially denies Paris’s request to marry Juliet due to her inexperience and underdevelopment. Capulet argues, “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” (1.2.8-11). Capulet does not refuse his daughter’s hand to Paris on the basis of her age alone but rather because of her lack of worldly experience and ripeness, meaning fertility. Moreover, it becomes clear that Capulet is not opposed to Juliet marrying in early adolescence due to his forceful insistence on her betrothal to Paris just two acts later. Capulet’s change of opinion on Paris’s proposal reveals that he does not believe Juliet’s age is necessarily a deterrent to matrimony.

Although uncertain, Capulet’s sudden insistence on his daughter’s engagement to Paris in the play’s third act may suggest that his daughter has become “ripe.” Nowhere in the text does it explicitly state that Juliet has undergone menstruation and is now fertile. In Renaissance Italy, this step into womanhood granted fathers the necessary consent (*consensus per verba de presenti*, translating to “through words of present consent”) to marry his daughter to his suitor of choice. As soon as Juliet began menstruation, Capulet would have been legally permitted to marry her to Paris. Under Renaissance Italy’s canon and civil laws, the minimum legal age for
giving *consensus per verba de presenti* was undetermined due to the only requirement being that “the couple had to have attained puberty: as a rule, twelve for girls, fourteen for boys. Puberty was not strictly determined by reaching the threshold ages, twelve and fourteen, but occurred when males could generate and females could become pregnant.”

Capulet’s wife makes reference to the ramifications of this law when she questions Juliet on her “disposition to be married” (1.3.66). When Juliet initially tells her mother that she does not wish to marry, Capulet’s wife retorts, “Well, think of marriage now. Younger than you / Here in Verona, ladies of esteem, / Are made already mothers. By my count, / I was your mother much upon these years / That you are now a maid. Thus in brief: / The valiant Paris seeks you for his love” (1.3.70-75).

Not only does Capulet’s wife state that by thirteen, Juliet’s age, she was already married and producing offspring, which is legal through *consensus per verba de presenti*, but in doing so, she brings into question whether Juliet is or is not eligible to be married under Italian law. On one hand, Capulet describes Juliet as unripe, but on another, his wife mentions, and later advocates, for Juliet to marry Paris, making it seem as though she is an eligible and thus fertile potential bride. Based on the textual evidence, it is unclear whether Juliet has been fertile since the play’s beginning, undergone menstruation during its course, or remains infertile throughout. Nevertheless, it is clear that at the moment of fertility, her father gains political, economic, and social control over her body and betrothal. He can marry her to any bachelor he pleases.

One notable example of a high-born Renaissance woman being married off at an extremely young age, even prior to puberty, is Bianca Maria Sforza of Pavia (1472-1510). Bianca Maria was born into the House of Sforza, a wealthy and powerful Italian Renaissance family that ruled for nearly a century after acquiring the Duchy of Milan following the eradication of the Visconti family in the mid-fifteenth century. When she was only
twenty-one-months-old, Bianca Maria was arranged to marry her seventeen-year-old first cousin, Duke Philibert I of Savoy.\textsuperscript{28} The marriage was momentary, however, as Philibert died in 1482, before Bianca Maria reached maturity, leaving her a widow at only ten years of age.\textsuperscript{29} Although Bianca Maria’s father, Duke Galeazzo Maria Sforza, was publicly assassinated when she was four-years-old, and thus could no longer arrange her future marriages, her uncle, Ludovico Sforza, now became her legal guardian and assumed the responsibility of matchmaker.\textsuperscript{30} In 1485, thirteen-year-old Bianca Maria became engaged to Janus Corvinius, the only son of the king of Hungary, but the marriage was never formalized.\textsuperscript{31} Only in 1494 did Bianca Maria, now twenty-one and fertile, remarry when her uncle offered her hand to the widowed King of the Holy Roman Empire, Maximilian I of Germany, who was thirteen years her senior.\textsuperscript{32} This alliance proved to be the most beneficial to the House of Sforza since Maximilian officially confirmed the dukeship of Ludovico Sforza in exchange for Bianca Maria and her dowry of 400,000 ducats,\textsuperscript{33} an incredibly large sum for this time. Bianca Maria’s marriages provide insight into the broader marriage culture of Renaissance Italy. First, women of nobility were legally given away by their male guardians to older men for the political, economic, and social benefit of the family clan. Second, fertility requirements established by the \textit{consensus per verba de presenti} were not always followed given that Bianca Maria’s first marriage was arranged before her second birthday.

In Renaissance Italy during the fourteenth century, it was not out of the ordinary for upper class girls as young as Juliet, or even younger, to be forcibly engaged to men much older than themselves; in truth, it was the norm. During this period, “[brides], especially in Florence, were typically much younger than grooms. Women as young as fourteen were often married to men in their thirties, partly to ensure the bride’s virginity.”\textsuperscript{34} However, virginity was not the only
reason, nor the primary one, for marrying girls fresh out of pubescence. In accordance with the dogma of the Roman Catholic Church, “the purpose of marriage [in Renaissance Italy] was, above all, to produce and provide a stable environment for the rearing of children, especially male children to carry on the family name and business and extend the family’s web of alliances.” In essence, the younger a woman was at the time of her marriage, the more children she could begin conceiving and bearing over the course of her lifetime, most likely a short one. Before the advancements of modern medicine, as many as twenty percent of mothers and children were estimated to have died in labor during this period. Italian women were so prepared for death during childbirth that many of them wrote their wills as soon as they discovered they were pregnant. If women did manage to survive a potentially fatal childbirth, they, as well as their male counterparts, were faced with yet another obstacle that diminished their life expectancy as well as Italy’s population in the 1300s: continual outbreaks of the Justinian plague. According to Irene Barbiera, a research fellow at the University of Padova’s Department of Statistical Sciences, and Gianpiero Dalla-Zuanna, a demography professor at the University of Padua, “[population] growth declined during the first half of the 14th century, and the plague of 1348 wiped out one-third of [Italy’s] population.” Due to the short life expectancies of men and women alike, and the latter’s added risk of mortality during childbirth, girls being married young was in a way pragmatic given their much shorter life expectancies compared to those of the modern day. Whether on the birthing bed or at the hands of a plague, death was always near for Renaissance women.

Although *Romeo and Juliet* takes place in Renaissance Italy and subscribes to the cultural marriage practices of its setting, the play was being performed to an audience in Elizabethan England, one who was familiar with an entirely different set of marriage customs. In fact,
Shakespeare’s choice to reduce Juliet’s age to thirteen would have proved foreign to his English audience when the play was most likely performed for the first time in 1597. In late-sixteenth century England, “the legal age for marriage [with parental permission] in Stratford was only fourteen years for men and twelve years for women,” yet the age of consent for both was twenty-one. Even though the legal age for marriage was low in retrospect to modern standards, the average age of marriage was in the mid-twenties; men and women would marry between the ages of twenty and thirty, while the preferred ages for women were either seventeen or twenty-one. According to Michael Best, an emeritus professor and Shakespeare scholar at the University of Victoria, “[marriage] statistics indicate that the mean marriage age for the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras was higher than many people realize. Data taken from birthdates...and marriage certificates reveals [the mean marriage age] to have been” twenty-seven-years-old for women between 1566 and 1619. Best also notes that “some noble houses’ marriages were indeed contracted at a young age, for reasons of property and family alliance,” but this was not extremely common. This notion is proven by a study conducted by the Population Investigation Committee, which examines the average age of marriage amongst British peerage, or those in the noble class, throughout the years. Taylor & Francis, Ltd., discovers that between 1575 and 1599, the average noble husband was married at twenty-eight, whereas the average noble wife was married at twenty-two. Although noble husbands tended to be slightly older than their wives, noblewomen married much later than their counterparts did during the Italian Renaissance. The average age at matrimony in these two cultures is one of the many variances that can be found within *Romeo and Juliet*. Likewise, Brooke and Shakespeare also take on differing approaches when it comes to the concept of arranged marriage.
III. Arranged Marriage to Paris

A second way in which Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* deviates from Brooke’s *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* is the Capulets’ arrangement for Juliet to wed Paris, a kinsman to the Prince. In Brooke’s version, Paris is an underdeveloped character who is introduced much later in the text as a remedy for Juliet’s grief over Romeus’s exile to Mantua as punishment for murdering her cousin, Tybalt. The true source of Juliet’s sorrow, which her mother initially perceives to be over Tybalt’s death, is unrevealed to her parents. Her mother attempts to uncover “[the] certain root whereon her grief and bootless moan doth grow” and determines that it is “grudging envy’s faint disease: perhaps she doth disdain / To see in wedlock yoke the most part of her feres, / Whilst only she unmarriéd doth lose so many years.” The belief that envy over her married friends is the root of their daughter’s sadness causes Capulet to find “a husband to provide” if she has not already “fixéd her friendly heart” on another, which is greatly distinct from Shakespeare’s Capulet who is unconcerned with his daughter’s matrimonial opinions. Additionally, and unlike in *Romeo and Juliet*, the Capulets do not want to secure a match for their daughter based on wealth but rather on one that will maintain “her happy health.”

The Capulets later inform Juliet that they have arranged for her to marry the County Paris, to which Juliet responds that she would rather “pierce [her] breast with sharp and bloody knife” than marry a man “whom [she] ne can, ne may, / Ne ought, to love.” Juliet’s father, enraged with “fiery eyne, and scarlet cheeks,” retorts with a lengthy and repetitive tirade about his intolerance for Juliet’s disobedience, while also threatening to disown her, strip her of her inheritance, and lock her away if she refuses to marry County Paris. Although Capulet’s threats
are harsh when taken at face value, the way in which Brooke writes this conflict does not effectively convey the extent of Capulet’s anger to the audience. Capulet’s rant spans an extensive forty-two lines and consists of many recurring points, thus making the whole exchange seem unnecessarily prolonged. Additionally, many of his threats become veiled by superfluous clusters of words and lines that confuse his central argument. For instance, when Capulet threatens to revoke Juliet’s inheritance if she refuses the proposal, he states:

   Even by His strength I swear, that first did give me life,
   And gave me in my youth the strength to get thee on my wife,
   Unless by Wednesday next thou bend as I am bent,
   And at our castle called Freetown thou freely do assent
   To County Paris' suit, and promise to agree
   To whatsoever then shall pass 'twixt him, my wife, and me,
   Not only will I give all that I have away
   From thee, to those that shall me love, me honour, and obey.51

Brooke spends a total of eight lines drawing out a threat that could be condensed into the last two. Capulet discusses his god-given abilities in the first two lines, the conditions of marital agreement in the third to sixth, and finally, his threat in the latter two. By the time Capulet arrives at his ultimatum, the audience is still unpacking the content of the previous lines, distracting from the sense of anger that is meant to be emitted. Ryan McKittrick, the director of artistic programs and dramaturg at the American Repertory Theater, alludes to the long-winded pace of Brooke’s writing when he contends that Romeo and Juliet is a “a swift, explosive drama” in comparison to “Brooke’s poem [that] may seem dull and sluggish” due to “the three thousand lines of rhyming couplets.”52
Unlike that of Brooke’s, Shakespeare’s Capulet does not arrange Juliet’s marriage based on “her happy health” and does not take into consideration whether or not she has already “fixéd her friendly heart” on another suitor. In Romeo and Juliet, Capulet initially instructs Paris to wait to marry Juliet after “two more summers” pass, but he changes his opinion entirely (1.2.10). When the Capulets inform Juliet of the arrangement, their daughter’s rejection of the match infuriates Capulet, whose anger is forcefully expressed and “too hot,” according to his wife (3.5.175). When he first hears that Juliet refuses the match, Capulet is in pure disbelief that his daughter would betray his “decree” and wonders, “Doth she not give us thanks? / Is she not proud? Doth she not count her blessed, / Unworthy as she is, that we have wrought / So worthy of a gentleman to be her bride?” (3.5.138, 142-145). However, his initial feelings of shock and bewilderment quickly transform into fury.

Shakespeare’s consistent use of exclamation and diction effectively conveys Capulet’s disdain for his daughter’s disobedience in a way that Brooke does not. Capulet exclaims, “But fettle your fine joints 'gainst Thursday next / To go with Paris to Saint Peter’s Church, / Or I will drag thee on a hurdle thither” (3.5.153-155). Capulet’s language is concise yet firm, making it clear that he will use physical force, if necessary, to bring her to the wedding ceremony. In between his commands, he insults Juliet by calling her a “green sickness, carrion,” “baggage,” “disobedient wretch,” “hilding,” “whining mammet,” and mentions how his “fingers itch” to strike her (3.5.156, 160, 164, 168, 185). Capulet berates Juliet so harshly that even his wife becomes appalled and asks, “what, are you mad.” while the Nurse says that he “is to blame...to rate her so” (3.5.158, 169). Even though his approach is criticized, Capulet’s message remains resolute: if Juliet declines Paris’s hand, she will “never after look [him] in the face. / Speak not. Reply not. Do not answer [him]” and “shall not house with” her family any longer, but rather
“beg, starve, die in the streets” (3.5.162-163, 189, 193). By threatening to ignore, disown, and expel Juliet, Capulet communicates just how crucial it was for daughters to comply with arranged marriages, regardless of their personal sentiments toward the match. Capulet does not take into account Juliet’s romantic relationship, which is unknown to him, because as the supreme authority and patriarch of the family, he does not need to.

During this time, Italian daughters’ fear of familial disownment due to the rejection of an arranged marriage was real. Felice della Rovere, the illegitimate daughter of Pope Julius II, became one of the most influential women of the Italian Renaissance through her education, wealth, and political connections. However, before her social elevation, she rejected several marriage propositions that her father negotiated for her. At either fourteen or fifteen-years-old, Felice complied with her first arranged marriage to an unknown husband, but upon his sudden passing, she became hesitant to remarry. Her marital reluctance caused her to reject many prospective husbands that her father hand-picked for her, including Roberto Sanseverino, Prince of Salerno, the most ideal candidate in her father’s eyes. After rebuffing Sanseverino, her dismayed father searched for more potential matches, but this was an onerous task given Felice was the illegitimate daughter of a pope and now twenty years of age, a much older bride by Italian Renaissance standards. Julius II finally arranged his daughter’s marriage to Gian Giordano, son of the leader of two of Rome’s most powerful aristocratic families. Regardless of her preference to remain unwed, Felice married Giordano in accordance with Italian law that granted fathers the final say in choosing their daughters’ spouses. Even though Felice eventually complied with her second marriage, her relationship with her father remained strained due to her prior disobedience. To regain the upper hand, Julius II humiliated Felice by not attending her wedding and by prohibiting any major festivities before and after the ceremony. Though the
father and daughter mended their relationship in time, their reconciliation does not detract from the reality that Felice was forced to marry a man against her will and was publicly humiliated, and nearly disowned, for her initial noncompliance with the arrangement.

In the male-dominated society of the Italian Renaissance, fathers like Julius II and Capulet were the *paterfamilias*, “a veritable lord in his household, making all the decisions on the use and disposition of the household’s resources,” one being its female members whose marriages were arranged by their father before his death. The first stage in contracting a bona fide Christian marriage in late medieval Italy was the *sponsalia* (betrothal), which Capulet makes to Paris when he promises that Juliet “will be ruled / In all respects by [her father]…” and thus will “be married to this noble earl” (3.4.14, 21). The process of *sponsalia* commenced “when a household head (father, widowed mother, senior male kinsman) enlisted the services of a marriage broker (*sensale*) to find a spouse for marriageable daughters and sons.” Although the use of marriage brokers was common amongst upper class families, this was not always the case as some matches were established more informally through an influential family connection. Regardless of how a match was produced, one facet of this process remained constant: the legal and moral responsibility of “a *paterfamilias* to arrange marriages on their [daughter’s] behalf with men whose social worth approximated that of his own family.”

Shakespeare makes evident that the Capulets’ desire for Juliet to marry Paris stems from a variety of reasons, but the most prevalent one is his wealth and social standing. When Capulet demands that Juliet marry after “having now provided” her with an eligible suitor, he refers to Paris as “A gentleman of noble parentage, / Of fair demesnes, youthful, and nobly trained, / Stuffed, as they say, with honorable parts” (3.5.180-182). Capulet lists the many “honorable parts” of Paris, such as his looks, youth, and educated background, but his utmost quality is his
“noble parentage” which Capulet highlights first. In Renaissance Italy, “the nobility, or second estate, whose privileges rested on the principle that nobles provided security and justice for society,” often held “important political posts and [served] as advisers to the king.” However, during the fourteenth century, some landholding nobles experienced reduced incomes but still managed to persist, reproduce, pass on their noble lineage, and “dominate society.” Although some nobles underwent a decrease in wealth, this does not seem to be the case for Paris when Capulet’s wife suggests that Juliet’s marriage to him would be economically advantageous. She states, “So shall you share all that he doth possess / By having him, making yourself no less” (1.3.94-95). By becoming Paris’s bride, Juliet would be able to use and benefit from his possessions which would only lead to her upward financial mobility. The arrangement for Juliet to marry Paris was not founded in romance or compatibility but rather financial and social strategy. Unlike Brooke’s Capulets who initially viewed marriage as a way to maintain Juliet’s “happy health,” those of Shakespeare possessed motivations in line with those of other “early modern Italian families [who] were about property and power” and ensured that “marriages were arranged and their economic bases carefully negotiated.”

After “the representatives of the prospective spouses concluded an alliance between the two families (fermare il parentado),” it was then necessary for the parties involved “to settle on the amount of the dowry the future bridegroom would receive upon marriage.” In the play, the exact amount of Juliet’s dowry is never mentioned, perhaps because she plots to join Romeo in Mantua with the aid of Friar Laurence before she is forcibly married to Paris. Since Juliet never marries Paris, he never receives her dowry from the Capulets. Even though the precise sum of Juliet’s dowry is never specified, it is alluded to in the play, along with the Capulets’ grand wealth. After Paris originally asks for Juliet’s hand in the second scene of the first act, Capulet
declines his offer, but challenges him to “woo her” at “an old accustomed feast” he is hosting that evening (1.2.15). Capulet invites Paris to his feast so that the young suitor can meet Juliet and witness his wealth. Capulet tells Paris that when he arrives at his “poor house,” he should “behold this night / Earth-treading stars that make dark heaven light” (1.2.23-24). Although Capulet tells Paris that “earth-treading stars” (meaning beautiful women) will light up the feast, it is ironic that he refers to his house as “poor” since it is quite the opposite. The sheer fact that Capulet hosts a feast symbolizes his familial wealth. During Renaissance Europe, “the banquet, as a particular form of festivity, flourished...from the mid-fourteenth century to the early seventeenth century” and acted as a “blatant demonstration of wealth and power” through its “lavish, ceremonial meal” and “conspicuous consumption.” Additionally, Capulet possesses enough funds to employ four known staff members who work in his household, those being Peter, Nurse, and two servingmen. Dennis Romano, a professor emeritus of history at Syracuse University, notes how during this time, “[servants], especially male servants, became objects of display and the necessary accouterments of a noble-lifestyle. For instance, patrons now had artists include servants...in their portraits; and among the wealthiest families the number of servants probably increased.” Typically, only wealthy, noble families like the Capulets were able to fund banquets and employ the staff who organized them in accordance with their employer’s instructions.

After Romeo and Juliet meet and kiss at the Capulet feast, he is then confronted by the Nurse who informs him that “he [who] can lay hold of [Juliet] / Shall have the chinks” (1.5.116-117). The term “chinks” in this context refers to the sound of coins striking against a surface; this is her way of telling Romeo that whoever marries Juliet will come into great wealth through either her inheritance as Capulet’s only child or her dowry. In Renaissance Italy, dowries
consisted of money, property, and goods, such as clothing and jewelry, and were “among the greatest financial obligations that families with female children faced.”

Parents of all classes attempted to elevate their family’s status by paying significant dowries to the groom in order for their daughters to enter into economically and socially advantageous marriages. Dowries were one of the few outlets in which families could move upward on the social hierarchy, yet “marriages among social equals [also] required substantial investment.” Exceptionally wealthy Italians not only contributed to the dowries of their own daughters but also to those of poor girls as acts of pious Catholic charity. Dowries were so vital in securing marriages for women that in the Republic of Florence in 1425, the Monte delle doti, a special public fund, was established to provide dowries for orphaned girls through an annual tax.

In terms of the public’s opinion on dowries, not all Italians supported the societal norm that the foundation of marriage was financial rather than romantic. Antonio Cammelli (1436–1502), an Italian poet and moralist from Pistoia, highlighted and criticized “the social script in which nubile girls were loveless pawns of venal parents and grubby marriage brokers.” In one of his sonnets, he denounces “the commercial component of alliance making and matchmaking” through a fictitious, but nonetheless realistic, tale of an impatient widow who ravenously attempts to find a husband for her daughter. The widow eventually comes into contact with Pietro, a marriage broker, who informs her that he has found a rich groom for her daughter, and in return, she promises a hefty dowry of one thousand ducats. After negotiating the dowry, she commands Pietro to ensure “that the young man be informed. Act in earnest! Conduct the deal and let the contract be signed.” In these comedic lines, Cammelli underscores the ultimate irony of matchmaking during this era: while the two parties, the widow and Pietro, are making negotiations, the potential groom is completely left in the dark, unaware that this
arrangement is even transpiring. Cammelli’s criticisms of the marriage market through this tale showcase the lack of autonomy of the future spouses, as well as the triumph of wealth over romance in Italian Renaissance marriages, a concept that is foreign to many people in the modern-day.

To Shakespeare’s Elizabethan audience, dowries and economically-advantageous marriages were not unfamiliar phenomena. However, unlike the marriages of the Italian Renaissance, those of Elizabethan England were far more multifaceted in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Frances Dolan, a professor of English at the University of California, Davis, notes how “[many] scholars have located dramatic changes in the motives for and meanings of marriage” during this era, one being “that marriage moved from a sacrament to a contract, from a practical arrangement to regulate sexuality and to provide for children to a loving bond between companions.” Lawrance Stone, an English historian of early modern Britain, makes the highly-debated argument “that a new emphasis on marital companionship and romantic love began in the upper classes and trickled down to the lower orders.” Dolan brings forth an expansive take on Lawrence’s hypothesis, agreeing with his premise that romantic love could be an integral component of marriage while also expanding upon it. She maintains that romantic love was certainly a motive in many Elizabethan marriages, but that it was not the only one as “[new] values jockeyed against old ones.” Ultimately, Dolan considers Elizabethan marriages to be diverse as couples of all classes had various motives for marrying, such as achieving financial gain or security, securing alliances, “forging bonds with friends and allies at a local level to dynastic marriages,” entering adult status and producing offspring, and lastly, loving another. Dolan concludes that romantic love was relevant “to some people” in “making and sustaining marriages” in Elizabethan England, which contrasts from the nearly exclusive
economic and social motives present in fourteenth century Italy. Romeo and Juliet’s chief motivation for marrying is their romantic love, but they must keep it a secret due to their society’s rigid socioeconomic framework behind marriage.

IV. Consummation of Marriage

Although the lovers enter into a covert marriage in both works, the desire to consummate their marriage, as well as the process of doing so, is much more apparent in Romeo and Juliet than in The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet. In fact, Brooke’s first reference to sex in his “To the Reader,” the poem’s moralistic preface, is a precautionary one. He warns readers and reprimands Romeus and Juliet, who he considers to be “a couple of unfortunate lovers, thralling themselves to unhonest desire;...attempting all adventures of peril for th’ attaining of their wished lust; using auricular confession the key of whoredom...; abusing the honourable name of lawful marriage to cloak the shame of stolen contracts.” Through these lines, Brooke makes clear that the lovers eventually consummate their marriage and shames them for doing so. He acknowledges that Romeus and Juliet’s marriage is a lawful one but also claims that their pursuit of matrimony is driven by their “unhonest desire” of “wished lust,” subsequently leading them to “whoredom” and the “most unhappy death.” Even though Romeus and Juliet did not engage in pre-marital sex, Brooke still believes that they “[abused] the honourable name of lawful marriage” due to their lustful desire for each other.

By the time Brooke wrote The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet in 1562, the Elizabethan era had transitioned away from Catholicism and ushered in Protestantism. Elizabeth I, a symbol of “maidenly chastity” and a “perpetual [virgin],” took the throne in 1559. Her first
action as queen was the establishment of an English Protestant church, which she oversaw as its supreme governor. Like his queen, Brooke was an ardent Protestant. Little is known about Brooke’s life, but his preface makes “his stridently Protestant views of the Roman Catholic church and its moral corruption” very clear. Brooke’s moral opinions expressed in his preface adhere to the Protestant definition of chastity and specify elements of Catholicism that he deems immoral, such as “auricular confession,” which he believes to be “the key of whoredom and treason.” In Elizabethan England, “chastity was a state, both spiritual and psychological, that could be observed through all stages of a person’s adult life.” Before and after marriage, Protestant women were expected to remain chaste, a concept whose definition changed to reflect these sexual norms of Protestant religiosity and virtue.

Kathleen Kelly and Marina Leslie, professors of English at Northeastern University, contend that for Elizabethan women, chastity was “her greatest prize” in securing “both patrilineage and property.” During this period, the definition of chastity from the abstinence of all sexual intercourse was altered to “purity from unlawful intercourse,” which aided in upholding the societal notion “that a chaste woman [should acquiesce] to the roles first of virginal daughter, then of wife and mother, as defined by the masculinist codes of English law.” This new definition of chastity no longer considered Elizabethan women who engaged in sex to be unchaste, but instead, informed society how purity can be preserved in the face of sexuality. Although the refurbished definition of chastity reflects the implications of this virtue in Elizabethan society, the Englishmen “of the period thought...women should be heedful of [this peerless virtue] because there was little difference between being unchaste and being thought unchaste.” Essentially, even if Elizabethan women vehemently conformed to and practiced this
definition of chastity, they could still be publicly adjudged and labeled as unchaste for various reasons.

From Brooke’s preface, he assesses Juliet as unchaste due to her marriage based on lust, but interestingly, only depicts the couple engaging in physical contact once before their engagement when they share a kiss at the Capulet Christmas party. In Elizabethan society, “English canon and civil law recognized two types of betrothal contracts [*sponsalia per verba de praeamenti* and *sponsalia per verba de futuro*],\(^{108}\) in which both typically followed with “the couple then [sealing] the bargain with a betrothal kiss,” as well as with an “exchange of tokens in the form of rings, gifts, or coins.”\(^{109}\) A betrothal kiss does not occur between Romeus and Juliet when they agree to wed. In fact, the couple only begin to kiss more frequently following their wedding. When Romeus believes Juliet to be dead in the tomb, he “watered her with tears, and then a hundred times her kissed”\(^{110}\) before committing suicide to join his lover in death. Brooke’s choice to increase the couple’s kissing after their marriage is in accordance with Elizabethan marriage customs. Alan Haynes, a writer on Elizabethan and seventeenth century history, underscores how kissing was a common practice amongst Elizabethan married couples. He explains how “foreign visitors to London constantly remarked on what they considered the freedom of English wives to order their own lives. One habit that intrigued them was kissing on the lips.”\(^{111}\) Brooke’s choice to greatly restrict this form of intimacy prior to their marriage is consistent with many Britons’ pursuit of Protestant chastity during this era. John Webster, an English dramatist and character writer,\(^{112}\) created the character type of a Protestant precisian, a person who is rigidly precise or punctilious in regard to religious rules.\(^{113}\) In *Sir Thomas Overbury His Wife. With Additions of New Characters* (1615), Webster claims that a man who identifies as a precisian would not “kiss a gentlewoman [before marriage] for fear of lusting after
her.” Romeus and Juliet only complete this lustful act once before their wedding, and not even during their betrothal, but regardless, Brooke views them as creatures who succumb to “the lusts of wanton flesh.”

Additionally, Brooke uses the poem’s preface as a lesson for readers, preaching to them that they should be wary of lustful actions and not follow suit. Brooke warns, “The glorious triumph of the continent man upon the lusts of wanton flesh, encourageth men to honest restraint of wild affections; the shameful and wretched ends of such as have yielded their liberty thrall to foul desires teach men to withhold themselves from the headlong fall of loose dishonesty.” Brooke praises men who are able to restrain themselves from giving into the “wanton flesh” of promiscuous women, which he considers to be a “glorious triumph” over their “wild affections.” He believes that if men refuse to act upon their lust, they will successfully avoid the descent into “loose dishonesty,” a trap that, in his opinion, Romeus and Juliet fall into. After giving this advice on remaining chaste in the face of licentious desires, Brooke paints Romeus and Juliet as individuals who disregarded this moral lesson as they “[attempted] all adventures of peril for th' attaining of their wished lust.” Brooke’s use of the phrase “th’ attaining of their wished lust” indicates that Romeus and Juliet were, indeed, victorious in eventually engaging in sex after their “adventures of peril” in pursuit of this act.

Brooke’s reprimand of Romeus and Juliet consummating their marriage almost downplays how integral this sexual rite of passage was in Elizabethan marriages. During this era, “there were two definitive parts to marriage: the contract (or spousals/espousals), and the marriage itself which gives form to the contract.” As mentioned previously, after either of the two forms of betrothal contracts were made and sealed with a kiss, a consummation contract soon followed. For instance, if a couple had agreed upon a sponsalia per verba de futuro, a
betrothal promise to marry in the future, this contract “was not absolutely binding and might be dissolved without much difficulty, provided physical consummation had not taken place.” If consummation had occurred prior to the formalized marriage, the betrothal contract became solidified and legitimized, making it nearly impossible for either or both parties to abandon the promise of marriage. The transformation of post-betrothal consummation into marriage “was common law in Britain” and a Protestant church or pastor was not necessarily required to formalize a marriage.

Even though Shakespeare, like Brooke, wrote his version of *Romeo and Juliet* during the Elizabethan era, he approaches sex in a much more open and explicit manner compared to his predecessor. Throughout the course of the play, many of Shakespeare’s characters make sexual jokes and references, as well as blatantly express their desire to engage in sex. The first indication that Romeo and Juliet plan on consummating their marriage is given by the Nurse in the fifth scene of the second act. Knowing that Romeo and Juliet are to be wed later in the day by Friar Laurence, the Nurse informs Juliet that she will “fetch a ladder by which your love / Must climb a bird’s nest soon when it is dark. / I am the drudge and toil in your delight, / But you shall bear the burden soon at night” (2.5.73-76). By preparing a ladder for Romeo to climb into Juliet’s room later that evening, the Nurse is an active participant in facilitating the couple’s first sexual experience together, or as she calls it, “the burden” that Juliet will bear as a new wife. The Nurse also signifies the eventual consummation of their marriage when she describes Romeo climbing the ladder, a phallic symbol, into Juliet’s bird nest, a vaginal one. Before they are married in the next scene, the logistical preparations for the newlyweds’ love-making are intact, courtesy of the Nurse’s cooperation.
In the church, Friar Laurence witnesses the passion and sexual desire of the lovers. He warns Romeo that “[these] violent delights have violent ends / And in their triumph die, like fire and powder, / Which, as they kiss, consume... / Therefore love moderately. Long love doth so. / Too swift arrives as tardy as too slow” (2.6.9-11, 14-15). In essence, Friar Laurence lectures Romeo that the lovers’ passionate desires, both romantic and sexual, will burn up like “fire and powder” if they do not learn how to love each other in moderation, which is the key to an enduring love in his opinion. Almost immediately, Romeo disregards Friar Laurence’s counsel as Juliet rushes into the church and the couple joins in a deep embrace and kiss. The couple fervently proclaims their true love for each other and Juliet states that she is “more rich in matter than in words,” meaning that she has more on her mind than just words, perhaps because she is consumed with the thought of the physical (2.6.30). After seeing the lovers’ sexual attraction, Friar Laurence comically concludes that “we will make short work, / For by your leaves, you shall not stay alone / Till the holy church incorporate two into one” (2.6.34-36). Romeo and Juliet’s passion is so fierce that Friar Laurence refuses to leave their presence until they are quickly wed out of fear that they might surrender to their sexual desires before the ceremony. However, after the lovers become husband and wife, their arrangements to consummate the marriage are not carried out as planned as Romeo is sentenced to exile later in the day for murdering Tybalt.

After hearing of Romeo’s punishment, Juliet cries for her husband but also at the fact that she remains a virgin. To the Nurse, Juliet exclaims, “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-widowèd. / Come, cords.—Come, Nurse. I’ll to my wedding bed. / And death, not Romeo, take my maidenhead” (3.2.132-137). Believing that she will never consummate her
marriage now, Juliet deems the rope, which was intended as “a highway to [her] bed,” useless and claims that she will die as a virgin-widow. In an attempt to comfort herself, she lays in her wedding bed and imagines that “death, not Romeo,” can take her virginity. Juliet’s sorrow over her inability to make love to Romeo showcases the immense sexual desire that she possesses for him; however, her sadness is short-lived as Romeo plots to sneak into her bedroom before he leaves for exile in Mantua. In fact, Friar Laurence is the one who conjures the idea of a final meeting between the lovers. He advises Romeo to “get thee to thy love as was decreed. / Ascend her chamber, hence, and comfort her” (3.3.145-146). Friar Laurence understands that Romeo must be banished by command of the Prince, yet in the same breath, he also believes that the lovers’ have one final opportunity to consummate, and thus solidify, their marriage. In Friar Laurence’s mind, if the lovers succeed in consummating their marriage, Romeo’s chances of returning to Verona in the future will improve.

It is not until the fifth scene of the third act that Romeo and Juliet consummate their marriage, or rather, it is strongly implied. The lovers wake up together in Juliet’s room the morning after their wedding night and she begs him to “stay yet” (3.5.16). Romeo responds that he wants to stay with her, even if it means he is “be ta’en” and “put to death” (3.5.17). They are forced to say their farewells as the lark’s singing marks the coming of dawn, forcing Romeo to climb out his wife’s window and head for Mantua. Although Shakespeare never details the intricacies of sexual intercourse, literary scholars commonly interpret this veiled scene as the morning after the lovers consummate their marriage, which is far more than Brooke references in his version. For instance, William Carroll, a professor of English at Boston University who specializes in Shakespeare and English drama, describes this scene as Romeo and Juliet’s “one night of marriage in the sheets of love” as they “consummate their marriage offstage…”
Carroll contends that Shakespeare “gives the lovers this one single night together” in order to “[heighten] the pathos,” which is “in contrast to his source Arthur Brooke,” who instead, rebukes the lovers for their sexuality.

Shakespeare’s choice to include Romeo and Juliet’s desire to consummate their marriage, their preplanning of the act with the Nurse, and even their “morning-after” scene differs greatly from Brooke’s adaptation, which conversely, prefaces the lovers’ sexuality merely to berate them for it. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the openness around the discussion of sex, as well as the strong implication of it, mirrors the immensely public affair of marriage consummation during the Italian Renaissance. Romeo and Juliet, indeed, consummate their marriage privately, rather than publicly, due to the element of secrecy in their relationship. The Nurse and Friar Laurence are aware of the lovers’ plans to consummate their marriage, but apart from them, Romeo and Juliet’s family, friends, and fellow townspeople are unaware of their relationship, romantically and sexually. However, unlike Brooke, Shakespeare chooses to embrace post-marital sexuality rather than to conceal or condemn it, which is congruent with the Italian Renaissance’s brazen atmosphere surrounding marriage consummation. If the circumstances surrounding their relationship were less discreet, and Romeo and Juliet were permitted to make their marriage public knowledge, then the moments leading up to their wedding night may have been on display for all of Verona to witness.

Similar to Elizabethan marriages, “a crucial aspect of marriage [in the Italian Renaissance] was the successful functioning of males in the marriage bed. Unconsummated marriages were essentially not marriages.” However, the differences of Elizabethan marriages from those of the Italian Renaissance lie in the cultural practices surrounding the consummation of marriage. After the dowry was exchanged and the ring ceremony was conducted, the
concluding stage of an Italian Renaissance marriage commenced in the public domain instead of in the privacy of the couple’s homes. The marriage only became legitimized in the eyes of the public, or the nozze, “after a procession through the streets of the city” occurred. The procession not only served to publicize the marriage to onlookers but also to lead to its consummation soon after. By traversing through the streets, “the bride moved from the home of her father to that of her husband, thus enacting the union both physically and symbolically.” Just like the gifts exchanged before and after the procession, “the bride herself was an object handed from one owner to another,” whose sole purpose was to conceive children, preferably on her wedding night. These festivities, including a lavish feast that often followed the procession and consummation, could last for several days, but by the end, “the union between the newlyweds] was to be clear to all.” After this public display and subsequent consummation, the couple typically moved into a dwelling of their own.

The wedding and consummation procession “was the most public part of the marriage, and provided an opportunity for the entire community to share in the celebration and thus ratify the marriage.” The Italians’ open and inclusive approach to consummation is exhibited in the grand wedding procession of Lucrezia Borgia, a widowed Italian noblewoman, and Alfonso d’Este, the Duke of Ferrara, in 1502. As her wedding party traveled from Rome to Ferrara, Lucrezia stunned the citizens of the city as she displayed her wealth through her fashion. On her wedding day, Lucrezia dawned full regalia, wearing black velvet with a cape of gold brocade trimmed with ermine, a hair net of gold and diamonds, and a necklace of rubies and pearls. Alfonso dressed in red velvet, even adorning his horse in crimson and gold to match his attire. The couple, along with their wedding procession, walked through the streets to greet their citizens who watched them in awe. Following this public affair, Alfonso and Lucrezia were
quickly left alone to consummate their marriage, until they re-emerged in the public eye to host their celebratory feast. Like Alfonso and Lucrezia, Romeo and Juliet are also upper class Italians, yet they never partake in this traditional consummation process, nor is their marriage even publicized to all of Verona until after their deaths. However, the openness in which Shakespeare conveys the lovers’ sexuality and intimate desires mirrors the public attitude toward consummation in Renaissance Italy. To Shakespeare and the Italian public, sexuality within the confines of marriage should not be concealed but rather overtly expressed.

V. Shakespeare’s Italian Influences

Why does Shakespeare deviate from his predecessors and incorporate elements of Italian Renaissance marriage culture in Romeo and Juliet? His choices may seem odd given that he is an Englishman writing in the Elizabethan era. However, the author chooses to set many of his plays in Italy; no fewer than eight of his thirty-five plays are set in Italian locations. Shakespeare’s romantic and escapist connection to Italy may explain why he chooses to depict Juliet’s age, the arranged marriage to Paris, and the lovers’ consummation in closer alignment with Italian Renaissance marriage culture rather than that of Elizabethan England. Some have speculated that Shakespeare may have travelled to this Mediterranean country during his “lost years,” the time between the mid-1580s and the early 1590s in which historians and scholars have no reliable information about his whereabouts. Additionally, “[it has been suggested that Shakespeare may have travelled to Northern Italy [between 1592 to 1594], because when theatrical life was in full swing again after the plague, he produced a number of plays with an Italian background, which show a remarkable acquaintance with the local topography of certain Northern Italian towns.”
However, these theories have never been substantiated. Regardless, what is known is that “Italy was his primary land of the imagination” and “his representations of [the country] are diverse and usually precise.” Given the available information, Shakespeare fabricated his representations of Italy based on his exposure to this country’s culture at home through books rather than travel abroad.

According to John Mullan, a professor of English at University College London and a specialist in eighteenth-century literature, one mean through which Shakespeare was introduced to Italian culture was his contemporaries’ and colleagues’ interest in the country. Many high-born and wealthy Elizabethan travelers voyaged to Italy during this era, and so it became the subject of many travel writings. Shakespeare even hints that Italy was a popular travel destination among the European population, including the Elizabethan elite, in his play *As You Like It*, a pastoral comedy. When the character of Jaques informs Rosalind that he possesses the “humorous sadness” of a “traveller,” she naturally concludes that he has “swam in a gondola” (4.1.19, 35). Rosalind’s quick supposition sheds insight into the popularity of Italy as a tourist attraction to international travelers during this era. Shakespeare may have never travelled to Italy himself nor spoken the language, but many of his educated peers did. Shakespeare most likely encountered educated Italians in London, one being John Florio, an Italian humanist scholar and tutor to Shakespeare’s patron, the Earl of Southampton. Even though there is no concrete evidence that the two writers ever met, it is apparent that the work of Florio greatly influenced that of Shakespeare.

Despite having almost no personal knowledge of the Italian language, Shakespeare was still undeterred in attempting to convey the country’s culture. Clara Longworth de Chambrun, a former American patron of the arts and scholar of Shakespeare, muses:
What strikes us above all in Shakespeare’s work, is to see how the dramatist has succeeded in giving us a true impression of Italian culture whereas, all things considered, one finds in him very little real knowledge. Shakespeare, though having a very slight acquaintance with the Italian language, gives to the spectator or the reader a very strong illusion of local colour.¹⁵¹

The playwright’s “slight acquaintance with the Italian language” may have stemmed from his study of Florio’s writings. Although Florio’s first language was Italian, he was also a translator who read European texts in their original languages before translating them into English.¹⁵² Florio’s multilingual translations of European literature would have allowed Shakespeare to read them in English. The Italian’s language “indisputably played an essential role in Shakespeare’s works,” specifically in terms of the vocabulary that he uses in his plays, such as novel words, proverbs, and compounds that were originally invented and published by Florio.¹⁵³ Not only does Shakespeare mirror Florio’s vocabulary, but he also emulates his bombastic writing style through the exaggerated use of metaphor, rhetoric, wit (quips and puns), poetic sense, and heavy use of proverbs.¹⁵⁴ Lastly, the two writers even “coin words in the same fashion,”¹⁵⁵ as thousands of Florio’s words and phrases later appear in Shakespeare’s works, including in the title of his comedy Love’s Labour’s Lost, a reference to First Fruits,¹⁵⁶ Florio’s first work published in London. In First Fruits, Florio writes, “We neede not speak so much of loue, al books are ful of loue, with so many authours, that it were labour lost to speak of Loue.”¹⁵⁷ From this sentence, Shakespeare supposedly handpicks Florio’s words of “love,” “labour,” and “lost” and then combines them into his title of Love’s Labour’s Lost.

As well as drawing inspiration from Florio’s language, Shakespeare’s plays, particularly Romeo and Juliet, incorporate language and form from the Italian Petrarchists. Shakespeare was
well-versed in this poetic form since “the very forms of Elizabethan verse and the terminology of its patterns (stanza, sestina) often came from Italy. The sonnet (from the Italian sonetto) was introduced to English in the 1550s in explicit imitation of Italian models, and especially of the Italian poet Petrarch.” Shakespeare uses sonnets frequently in his plays. For instance, in *Romeo and Juliet*, the prologue of the play is in the form of an Elizabethan sonnet, a form inspired by Petrarchan sonnets. Additionally, even Shakespeare’s characters display the influence of the poet Petrarch, signifying his impact on the work of the playwright himself. Talking to Benvolio, Mercutio predicts that Romeo will now begin writing poetry about his unrequited love for Rosaline. He jests, “Now is he for the / numbers that Petrarch flowed in,” meaning that Romeo, heartbroken, is now able to appreciate and imitate Petrarch’s poetry (2.4.38-39). Shakespeare’s admiration for Petrarch is visible in his play’s sonnets and character dialogue but also in *Romeo and Juliet*’s prevalent theme of doomed love. Petrarch was adored by the English public for his sonnets that expressed his personal experience with hopeless or tragic love, the central theme of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Mario Praz, an Italian art critic and scholar of English literature, argues that Shakespeare’s use of Italian-based form and language originates from the work of Petrarch, as well as other Italian poets. Praz contends that “Shakespeare succeeds so well in imitating the Italian Petrarchists, that in two passages his similes coincide with those used” in Luigi Grotto’s *Adriana* (1578), a tragic play inspired by the Romeo and Juliet narrative. Although *Romeo and Juliet* and *Adriana* are based on the same star-crossed lovers trope, the two plays differ entirely in terms of the treatment of the story and the study of the characters. Even so, “the resemblance between [many] passages” in both plays, “and the mention of the nightingale in the parting scene between the lovers, led some critics to conclude that Shakespeare knew Grotto’s
tragedy.” Literary critics merely hypothesize that Shakespeare was familiar with Groto’s work, as there is no conclusive evidence that he studied or used it as a basis for his own tragic drama. Even if Shakespeare had never come across Groto’s play, this fact does not minimize Shakespeare’s knowledge of Italian drama or poetic form; instead, it makes his conception of these subjects that more impressive. Praz explains that “the resemblances” between the plays “prove only that Shakespeare succeeded so well in depicting an Italian lover that the language he puts into his mouth may occasionally appear derived from...Luigi Groto.” In essence, Shakespeare’s language in *Romeo and Juliet* may not stem from that in *Adriana*, but his linguistic depiction of Italian lovers and romance is so accurate that it does, in fact, appear to hail from Groto’s play.

Praz argues that Shakespeare portrays Italian lovers accurately, an impressive feat given the stereotypes of Italians that he would have been exposed to in Elizabethan society. During Shakespeare’s lifetime, stereotypical national characterizations were in full force in Europe. The English appreciated Italians for instigating “the revived interest in classical antiquity,” but “by the end of the sixteenth century Italomania was turning into Italophobia.” With time, many in the Englishmen developed “feelings of cultural inferiority...in [their] stereotypes and caricatures” of “Italians and the Italianised.” For instance, one English stereotype of Italians was that they were now a corrupted and degenerate group compared to their Roman descendants. In 1600, Philemon Holland, an English schoolmaster, physician, and translator, warned his readers that they should not travel to Italy since its inhabitants are “so farre degenerate” compared to their ancestors who were “so devoute, so virtuous and uncorrupt in old time.” Holland’s perception that Italians of the early-seventeenth century were corrupt, both morally and religiously, did not deter the Elizabethan elite from travelling to Italy, as the country still remained a popular tourist
destination. Even though Elizabethans may have continued to travel to this foreign land, many of them simultaneously “abhorred and feared Italy as a land of Catholicism, lewd living, and lewd writing,” leading to both an “idealization and vilification” of its inhabitants.

Shakespeare did not use the stereotype of the corrupt Italian when crafting the characters of Romeo and Juliet, nor does he ever label the lovers as immoral degenerates in the text. However, when it comes to Romeo, many scholars argue that he represents the stereotypical Italian man, an overly romantic, passionate, and hypersexual lover. Vincenza Minutella, a researcher in English language and translation at the University of Torino, notes how “Romeo’s use of Petrarchan language, of oxymora, makes him also a stereotype of the Italian man in love with love…” As a character, Romeo is certainly “in love with love.” In the first scene of act one, the audience is introduced to a heartbroken Romeo who hyperbolically and dramatically tells his friends about his devastation over his unrequited love for Rosaline, only to fall in love with Juliet later that night at the Capulet ball. Romeo’s frequent pursuit of love puts him in touch with his emotional side. To the Elizabethan public, a person infatuated with the idea of love was typically a woman, and therefore, to Minutella, “Romeo’s effeminacy” is also an Italian stereotype.

Similarly, some scholars also argue that Shakespeare stereotypes Juliet as an unchaste Italian woman prone to sexual openness. Juliet never engages in sexual intercourse with Romeo before their marriage, but throughout the play, she frequently voices her sexual desire toward him. To herself, Juliet says, “Spread thy close curtain, love-performing night /...Come, civil night” (3.2.5, 10). Juliet declares that she will close her blinds when Romeo arrives at night, the time of day in which lovers can make love in the dark. She then begs for “civil night” to come, showing her eagerness to make love with Romeo. Shakespeare makes the choice to
emphasize Juliet’s sexuality but never condemns her for it as a woman. In the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth century, an English “audience would have been familiar with the stereotype of the sexually decadent Italian female from visits to the theatre,” as “many...plays set in Italy [featured] courtesans and adulteresses.” Juliet was far from either a courtesan or an adulteress, but her explicit sexual desires would have proved shocking to a largely Protestant audience whose religious mores advocated for the upholding of chastity in all forms. Juliet’s open attitude and comments about sex demonstrate the English stereotype that Italian women, because of their Catholicism, were less chaste than their English Protestant counterparts. Shakespeare may have never intended to stereotype Juliet as an unchaste Italian woman, and some may argue that he does not at all, but regardless, his portrayal of her would have played into the stereotypes of Italian women familiar to his audience.

Through character, language, and setting, Shakespeare brings *Romeo and Juliet* closer to Italian culture. The playwright successfully used the many Italian influences around him to culturally authenticate elements within the play, all without leaving England. Shakespeare not only incorporates Italian culture within the play to be culturally accurate but also to pay homage to a country that he admired for its contributions to the world, and especially, to his disciplines of drama and poetry. No personal journals or diaries exist from Shakespeare divulge his feelings toward Italy, yet his depiction of the country and its culture reveals his adoration for them. His choice to frequently set his plays in Italy, his references to Petrarch and his work, and his avoidance of excessively stereotyping his Italian characters point to his considerate, diligent depiction of the country and its people. In the first lines of *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare immediately praises the beauty of the country when he “lays [the] scene” in “fair Verona” (Prologue. 1-2). Italy’s scenic beauty and cultural authority in the arts and humanities was not
lost on Shakespeare whose work was predicated on those of the Italians who came before him. It made sense that Shakespeare chooses to include Italian culture in *Romeo and Juliet*, as the play would cease to exist in the manner that it does without the literary and dramatic contributions of Italian creatives and intellectuals.

**VI. Conclusion**

By bringing *Romeo and Juliet* closer to Italian Renaissance marriage culture, rather than that of Elizabethan England, Shakespeare succeeds in illustrating the Italian setting of the play, as well as allowing his audience to witness the marriage customs present in this region and era. Shakespeare’s choice to historically align this play with Italian Renaissance marriage culture stems from the several Italian influences that shaped his writing and fostered an appreciation for a foreign land that he most likely never experienced for himself. The foundation for *Romeo and Juliet* may have been Brooke’s version of the famous folktale, but it is Shakespeare’s Italian influences that provide him with a distinct, fresh, and more culturally authentic take on this centuries-old tragedy. Deviating from Brooke’s tale, Shakespeare reduces Juliet’s age to thirteen, strongly emphasizes Capulet’s authority over his daughter’s marriage prospects, and does not shame, but rather openly discusses, the lovers’ sexuality and consummation; in turn, these three divergences from his predecessor emulate the marriage customs and norms of the Italian Renaissance. Shakespeare may have never travelled to Italy, but the historical and cultural accuracy in which he depicts Italian marriage would make one believe that he had. *Romeo and Juliet* remains a tale of two star-crossed lovers and their untimely deaths, while also acting as a
window into a marriage culture that favored wealth and power over romance and love: a reality that Romeo and Juliet failed to accept.
Endnotes


9. Ibid., 388.


19. Ibid.


22. Ibid., 1129.


24. Ibid.


26. Ibid.


29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.


33. Marek, The Bed and the Throne, 42.


35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.


41. Ibid.


43. Ibid.


45. Although the Capulets also see Paris as a potential cure to Juliet’s sadness in Romeo and Juliet, the subject is only briefly discussed in comparison to the many other reasons given for this match, such as children, increased social standing, and good looks.


47. Ibid., p. 69, ll. 1859, 1868.

48. Ibid., p. 68, l.1870.


50. Ibid., p. 72, l. 1946.

51. Ibid., p. 73, ll.1971-1978.


54. Ibid., p.69, ll. 1859, 1868.


56. Ibid., 1148.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid.


63. Murphy, The Pope's Daughter, 74.

64. George Williams, Papal Genealogy: The Families and Descendants of the Popes (McFarland, 2004), 55.

65. Murphy, The Pope’s Daughter, 81-82.

66. Cavallar and Kirshner, Marriage, Dowry, and Citizenship in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy, 9.

67. Ibid., 21.


69. Cavallar and Kirshner, Marriage, Dowry, and Citizenship in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy, 21.


71. Cavallar and Kirshner, Marriage, Dowry, and Citizenship in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy, 21.


73. Duiker and Spielvogel, Cengage Advantage Books, 489.
74. Ibid.
76. “Brooke’s ‘Romeus and Juliet,’” p. 68, l. 1870.
80. Ibid.
85. Ibid.
86. Ibid.
87. Cavallar and Kirshner, *Marriage, Dowry, and Citizenship in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, 94.
88. Ibid., 22.
89. Ibid.
90. Ibid.
91. Ibid.


93. Ibid.

94. Ibid.

95. Ibid.

96. Ibid.

97. “Brooke’s ‘Romeus and Juliet,’” lxvi.

98. Ibid., p. 30, ll. 798-804.

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103. “Brooke’s ‘Romeus and Juliet,’” lxvi.


109. Ibid., 72.

110. “Brooke’s ‘Romeus and Juliet,’” p. 97, l. 2634


112. “John Webster,” Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed December 7, 2021,


115. “Brooke’s ‘Romeus and Juliet,’” lxvi.

116. Ibid., 67.

117. Ibid., lxvi.


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120. Ranald, “‘As Marriage Binds, and Blood Breaks,’” 71.


123. Ibid.

124. Ibid., 1141.

125. Ibid.

126. Ibid.

127. Ibid., 1146.

128. Ibid., 1147.

129. Ibid.


131. Ibid., 58.


133. Andrea Bayer, et al., *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008), 12.

134. Ibid.


136. Bayer, et al., *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy*, 12.

137. Ibid., 64.


141. Ibid.

142. Medievalists.net, “Lucrezia Borgia and Her Marriage to Alfonso D'Este.”

143. Ibid.


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147. Ibid.


150. The British Library, “Shakespeare and Italy.”


153. Ibid.

154. Ibid.
155. Ibid.


157. Ibid.

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