

ELIZABETHAN CULTURE: LOVE AND MARRIAGE FOUR CENTURIES AGO

Romeo and Juliet gives a fascinating snapshot of English life in the late 16th century, especially about love and marriage.

Obedience, hierarchy (“knowing your place in life”), and order were prized and expected of all good citizens. Any violation of duty or rebelliousness and disrespect of the laws would have consequences, even though enforcement of those laws was often arbitrary and ineffective. However, the way women were seen by the society was clearly defined. Elizabethan culture was patriarchal, and loyalty to your relatives was more important than anything else. Men controlled their wives and daughters. Chastity was a woman’s most important virtue. A father could disown, starve, or lock up a woman who had violated the family “honor.”

Queen Elizabeth defied all expectations of the age. She never married because she realized early that marriage meant loss of power. Even though the general opinion of the time was that women’s minds were weak and that a female head of state was an “offense against nature,” she ruled with great political skill and cunning.

Juliet is expected, as she approaches her 14th birthday, to be married and already planning her family. Shakespeare never specifies Romeo’s age, although it is often assumed to be a few years older than Juliet. In Elizabethan England the age of consent was 12 for a girl and 14 for a boy. However, statistics show that the average age of marriage in Elizabethan England at the time *Romeo and Juliet* was written was in the mid-20s, about the same as it is today. It is thought then that Juliet’s young age was meant to be extreme to audiences of that time as well, and perhaps a comment on Shakespeare’s perception of Italian culture.

The decision to marry is in the hands of Juliet’s parents. A father chose a daughter’s husband and it was considered dishonorable and disrespectful to communicate her desires in the process. Juliet must beg her father’s forgiveness after speaking out against marrying Paris. When a woman married, all of her personal property became the property of her husband and she had no say in how it was spent. Women were regarded as chattel (property) to be married to improve the family fortune or political alliances. Elizabethans thought women needed a male caretaker (remember, females could not have careers). However, Shakespeare lived during the time of the Renaissance, which was a turbulent and exciting period of history in which many old and accepted ideas were being questioned, examined, and interpreted. In this time the idea of romantic, personal love flourished. *Romeo and Juliet* is all about the struggle between personal love and “correct” matchmaking.

