

# Juliet's Brazilian Mother<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** Shakespeare's Juliet is arguably the first woman of tragic stature to appear in Western literature, since Greek tragedy or the death of Dido in the fourth book of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Our first glimpse of Juliet's active moral agency occurs when she coyly answers her mother's attempt to persuade her to base her decision to marry Paris by looking him over at the party that night. By contrast, her mother, Lady Capulet, comes across as a uneducated, even bitter woman who struggles to explain the facts of life to her daughter. But in the Brazilian movie version, "O Casamento do Romeu e Julieta" (directed by Bruno Barreto, 2005), Lady Capulet is no longer shallow. As in several other adaptations of Shakespeare, the Brazilian version of Shakespeare's most popular play solves problems gender by updating them into a realistic setting where women are active moral agents despite living in a world where men are men.

**Key Words** Brazil; Shakespeare; Juliet; Lady Montague; moral action; agency

Shakespeare's Juliet is arguably the first woman of tragic stature, in the Aristotelian sense, to appear in Western literature since Greek tragedy or the death of Dido in the fourth book of Virgil's *Aeneid*. By Aristotelian I mean that she is a moral agent, someone whose actions are based on decisions based on thought. Of course, she is also a victim of circumstances. Friar John's letter never reaches Romeo, for example, but such plot twists are the least intellectually interesting parts of *Romeo and Juliet*. Because coincidences and uncontrollable circumstances may seem somehow intentional to the common eye, Shakespeare associates them with fate and the stars. But in our role as thinkers, we are interested in what characters do based on their decisions. What Aristotle in the *Poetics* calls character (ethos) is based on thought (dianoia), and we can know what characters think by listening to what they say. Decisions based on thought makes characters moral agents, what we call fully developed "characters," not mere stage figures. One way of defining plot or *mythos* is as chains of decisions by moral agents, not just a sequence of events. No one creates chains of moral decisions better than Shakespeare, who uses them to define the structure of scenes.

We first glimpse Juliet's active moral agency when she coyly answers her mother's attempt to persuade her to base her decision to marry Paris by using her eyes, not her brain: "I'll look to like, if looking liking move" (1.3.97). Lady Capulet, by contrast, comes across as a uneducated, even bitter woman who struggles to explain the facts of life to her daughter as she gives an outwardly persuasive but troubling out-

line of how Juliet should evaluate Paris at the Capulet party that evening in her speech that compares Paris first to a book, then to a fish.<sup>2</sup>

The reverse is true in “O Casamento do Romeu e Julieta” (“The Marriage of Romeo and Juliet,” dir. Bruno Barreto 2005), a Brazilian film version of Shakespeare’s play. This rather adult production of Shakespeare’s most popular play solves gender problems by updating them into a realistic setting where women are active moral agents despite living in a world where men are men. Julieta is a “strong woman,” not a thirteen-year old (Alcantara 222). She coaches soccer (a trope for powerful women in Shakespeare films), but she struggles against the board of directors of Palmeiras, the club where she plays, because they believe that soccer is not a sport for women.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, perhaps because she is meant to reflect a certain twenty-something generational attitude, Julieta never really takes control of her destiny. The contrast with her mother, the Brazilian Lady Capulet, is instructive. Isabella, as Lady Capulet is called, is no longer shallow. Instead she is a fount of motherly wisdom. She helps her daughter solve the problem of Romeo’s sexual dysfunctionality. She stands up to circumstances by using language to mask her true meaning. She defies her husband’s insane passion for soccer. Ultimately she turns a potential tragedy into a movie with a happy ending. In short, Isabella is the most active moral agent in the movie “O Casamento do Romeu e Julieta.”

To show how the Brazilian version shifts the portrait of a female agency from Juliet to her mother, I want first to look at the initial conversation between Shakespeare’s Juliet and her mother in a way that I think serves as a model for classroom discussion of character and moral agency. Shakespeare’s language can be difficult, whether one is studying in America, China, or Brazil, but students and teachers find his plays stimulating, particularly *Romeo and Juliet*, and he helps to relieve the tedium of language lessons.

Let us start, then, with the conversation in act one, scene three, of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* where Lady Capulet asks her daughter to consider marrying Paris. Here we see the weakness of Juliet’s mother that the Brazilian film will correct, and we see the strength of Juliet’s mind, that the Brazilian film will transfer to Isabella. Again, a moral action is different from the action of the plot or story. It is the result of thought, not chance. Because a moral action results from deliberate choice, it gives us insight into the character or *ethos* of a person. We can only understand Juliet by analyzing not what happens to her, but what she does as a result. At the same time, by looking closely at the language of Juliet’s mother, we can see how she thinks, or does not think.

In the third scene of *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet’s mother visits her daughter to break the news to her that her father has arranged for Juliet to marry Paris, even though she is not yet fourteen years old. She explains that Juliet will be able to see Paris at a party to be given that night at the Capulet house. We know that Juliet will see Paris at the party and fall in love with him, renouncing her father’s choice of Paris. But at this point the only issue is whether Juliet will accept her mother’s persuasions that she prepare herself to become a wife. This persuasion comes in the form of a very odd speech by Juliet’s mother. First she compares Paris to a book (or “vol-

ume”); “Read o’er the volume of young Paris’ face” (1.3.81). Her idea is that what the book of Paris needs, more than anything, is a cover to lie on it, and that cover is Juliet. Uncomfortable with the sexual innuendo of her own imagery, she digresses to talk about fish: “The fish lives in the sea” (1.3.89). Then she resumes the development of her book imagery—“That book in many’s eyes doth share the glory” (1.3.91)—till she concludes that by marrying Paris, Juliet will share his possessions.

Lady Capulet’s speech is very difficult even for native speakers of English. It helps to keep in mind that the speech moves from the outside of the book (“volume”), to the lines written there (“writ,” “lineament”), to the hidden meaning (“obscured”). It makes sense to Lady Capulet that the meaning is “obscured” because she herself probably cannot read—we know that her servant cannot read the guest list he is given for her party—even though she expects Juliet to make sense of Paris as a book. She therefore does not refer to Paris as a collection of words (it is not obvious to illiterate people that writing is a collection of individual words; similarly, many of my students are surprised to learn that Chinese has words and sentences). Instead, Lady Capulet tells Juliet to focus on his good looks, the beauty of his face. I have underline the words that derive from the metaphor of the book, which Lady Capulet imagines not as printed but as a bound manuscript written with a quill pen:

What say you? Can you love the gentleman?  
 This night you shall behold him at our feast;  
 Read o’er the volume of young Paris’ face,  
 And find delight writ there with beauty’s pen;  
 Examine every married lineament  
 And see how one another lends content.  
 And what obscured in this fair volume lies  
 Find written in the margent of his eyes.  
 (1.3.79 – 86)

Notice that her phrase “married lineament” refers to the lines on the page. These lines (“lineament”) pair off (“married”), like couples, and form a harmony that is the “content” of the book. The word “content” has a double sense. It refers to the harmony makes a couple *contént* (meaning happy). But it also refers to the book is about, its *cóntent*. And the content of a book, for Lady Capulet, is “obscured.” She doesn’t expect to understand writing, and she doesn’t really expect Juliet to understand Paris.

Lady Capulet’s speech continues in a vein of uncertainty. Like all parents, she finds it difficult to talk to her daughter about sex. Lady Capulet gropes for a solution and comes up with two rather unrelated sets of images. First, she rather daringly compares Juliet to the cover of a book, then she compares Paris to a fish in the sea:

This precious book of love, this unbound lover

To beautify him, only lacks a cover:  
 The fish lives in the sea, and tis much pride  
 For fair without the fair within to hide;  
 (1.3.87 – 90)

Both images are indirect and perhaps indecent. Usually the man is said to “cover” the woman (women were known as “femmes covert” in English law), and again, traditionally the man is on top during sex. Still groping for a way to broach the issue of marriage, Lady Capulet rather astoundingly brings in a fish. One would think that as a young girl Juliet can only be confused. In Italian, but also in Shakespeare’s play, “fish” is slang for that which the man normally keeps hidden, or boasts about the size of, as Sampson does in his conversation with Gregory that opens the play (“Tis well thou are not fish; if thou hadst, thou hadst been poor-John,” 1.1.30 – 31). Lady Capulet never really talks directly to Juliet about sex; instead she says that Juliet can be the “fair without” (that is, the beautiful [thing] on the outside).

Like the sea, the cover of a book hides what is inside. But just as sex is confusing, and Lady Capulet never really confronts it directly, so is the role of wealth in marriage, which enters her speech, again indirectly, when she talks about the gold clasps of a book. After losing her way in the fish image, Lady Capulet resumes her theme of ornamentation by comparing Juliet to the golden clasps that people used to bind great books during the Renaissance:

That book in many’s eyes doth share the glory  
 That in gold clasps locks in the golden story;  
 So shall you share all that he doth possess,  
 By having him, making yourself no less.  
 (1.3.91 – 94)

I think people usually regard Paris as the “gold clasp,” but it may well be that Juliet is the rich one. What Lady Capulet is saying is that Paris is the kind of man who will share his wife’s wealth with her. Although he will legally control her money, he will not stint her, as so many husbands did when they weren’t beating or otherwise mistreating their wives. It was not uncommon for husbands to gamble away a wife’s wealth rather than invest it wisely. The law gave them that power, so all Lady Capulet can do is hope for her daughter that Paris will not be mean to her.

Probably impatient with Lady Capulet’s failure to mention sex, Juliet’s nurse picks up Lady Capulet’s last two words (“no less”) and insists that Juliet can expect Paris to get her pregnant. Ignoring Lady Capulet’s rather obvious meaning that Juliet will increase her social statute by marrying Count Paris, the nurse instead says that Paris will make her physically bigger, not less: “No less! nay, bigger; women grow by men.” 1.3.95).

What does Juliet learn from her mother? The upshot of Lady Capulet’s speech is that Juliet is told very little about men. She learns; 1) that she is to use her eyes only (I think she finds this appalling); 2) that men cannot be known; 3) that marriage

must quickly follow (she will be very quick in asking Romeo to marry her on the balcony [“If that thy bent of love be honorable, / Thy purpose marriage” 2. 2. 143 – 144]); and 4) that pregnancy follows unavoidably, something Romeo also believes (1. 1. 220; Albright 47).

Now let us ask, what exactly does Juliet do this scene. What is the moral action? That is, what is the action taken as the result of deliberate thought about one's immediate circumstances? Is the action something that Lady Capulet does? Well, what she does is prepare her daughter to meet Paris, but that is not something that develops during the scene. She enters act one, scene three with that thought in mind. She only does what she had already planned to do earlier. An action, in order to have dramatic power, has to be something that results from the shape of what we see before us in a scene.

Therefore let us look instead at what Juliet does in response to her mother's speech, which she had not expected to hear:

*Lady Capulet:*

Speak briefly, can you like of Paris' love?

*Juliet:*

I'll look to like, if looking liking move;

But no more deep will I endart mine eye

Than your consent gives strength to make it fly.

The key to Juliet's response is her use of the conditional word “if” and the way she imitates an obedient daughter. She understands, from what she has heard, that what her mother is having trouble saying, or does not or cannot admit, is that there's more to a man than his looks. Thus her use of the conditional “if” summarizes and to an extent corrects her mother's overt meaning, that a man can be judge by his looks. Juliet says that to the extent a man can be so judged, so she will look; then as if to correct the impression that she is correcting her mother, she says something subservient, that without further permission, she will do no more than look. We know that subservience is an act for Juliet, one she will show again when she lies to her nurse, saying she will submit to her father in act four.

Juliet's careful words suggest that she finds the logic, imagery, and lessons of her mother's speech about the facts of life to be odd, if not appalling. She understands her mother is having trouble admitting that there is more to a man than his looks. She may not even know there is more to love. So what does Juliet do? She gently corrects her mother by using the conditional “if.” Then, to correct any impression that she might be arguing with her mother, she says something subservient. She plays a social role, as women often did.

Juliet's character dominates this scene, as it does through most of the play, where in fact Romeo rarely is the main moral agent. Throughout the play Juliet is more thoughtful than Romeo. Where he is swept along by passions, she takes action based on thought. Juliet recognizes that her parents' world does not make sense, and that her mother gives her questionable advice about marriage. This same independ-

ence will soon let her decide that her family's hatred should not stop her from loving Romeo.

By contrast to Juliet, Lady Capulet in the play seems to be in an unhappy marriage to a much older man. We know Lady Capulet was about Juliet's age when she became a mother ("I was a mother much upon these years / That you are now a maid," 1. 3. 73 – 74), and that Capulet says to Paris that young women are "marred" when they become mothers that early (1. 2. 12). Many productions suggest that Lady Capulet is having an affair with Tybalt, as Franco Zeffirelli does in his 1968 film version. When Romeo kills Tybalt, Lady Capulet screams for Romeo's death ("Romeo must not live," 3. 1. 181); she even tells Juliet that she intends to hire someone to poison Romeo in Mantua (3. 5. 89), showing a surprising initiative that, in fact, the Brazilian film picks up very well.

In "O Casamento do Romeu e Julieta" Isabella begins, as Lady Capulet does in Shakespeare's play, as a woman who conforms to her husband's ways—here, his crazy passion for the Palmeiros football team. But in contrast to Shakespeare's Lady Capulet, who has difficulty talking to her daughter about men, in a brief but telling scene Isabella shows that she is wise even in the ways of men. After Romeo fails to perform sexually, Isabella calmly assures her grief-stricken daughter that these things happen. The actual reason is that Romeu feels inhibited by the Palmieros soccer paraphernalia in Julieta's bedroom. Isabella cannot know this; he consolation is a bit comic, like Lady Capulet's comparison of Paris to a book. Nonetheless Isabella is given a very adult moment, and this Brazilian shift in perspective from Juliet to her mother is unlike any other version of *Romeo and Juliet* that I know.

*Julieta*: Meu Deus!

*Isabella*: Homem que è homem brocha. Normal.

*Julieta*: Normal quando acontece com os outros, não com a gente, nè mãe?

*Isabella*: Minha filha, talvez seja amor. Eu li: "a maior homenagem que um homem pode fazer . . . para uma mulher, è não conseguir logo da primeira vez."

*Julieta*: Mas essa já foi a segunda!<sup>4</sup>

*Julieta*: Oh, my God!

*Isabella*: Sometimes men can't get it up. It's normal.

*Julieta*: Normal when it happens to other people, not to us.

*Isabella*: Maybe it's love. I read: "When a man can't perform the first time . . . it's because he cares too much".

*Julieta*: But this was the second time!

Isabella's stature increases most in the movie's version of act three, scene five, where we can best see how the makers of "O Casamento" transformed her character. In Shakespeare's play, Lady Capulet consoles her daughter, who she believes is weeping for the death of her cousin Tybalt. In fact, Juliet weeps for the banishment of Romeo, to whom she is now married, but she hides her situation from her mother. As in their conversation about Paris, Juliet pretends to agree with her, saying that she wishes to

see Romeo dead (“behold him dead”). What she really means is that she wishes to see Romeo (“behold him”) and that his banishment has stopped her heart: “dead / is my poor heart”:

*Juliet*: Indeed I never shall be satisfied  
 With Romeo, till I behold him—dead—  
 Is my poor heart, so for a kinsman vex’d.  
 (3.5.93–95)

It takes a very skilled actress to get both senses across. None of the movie versions I know manages this double meaning. But in “O Casamento,” after Isabella learns, as Lady Capulet never does, the truth about Romeo, Isabella uses double meanings to help make Juliet’s father think that Romeo is a Palmeiros football fan when she knows he is not. As Alfredo Baragatti revels that his daughter is in love, Isabella reminds him that Julieta will have to leave the house—a metaphor for marrying out of the family, perhaps even to a fan of the Corinthians football team. It doesn’t really work, although it shows her character, just as Juliet’s deception of her mother only gets her deeper into trouble. But it works temporarily, giving Julieta time to get pregnant and setting up Isabella’s final confrontation with her husband:

Isabella’s deception falls into two parts. First she has a premonition (and common thing in Shakespeare’s play) that she knows Romeu; then she is about to identify him as a rapid Corinthians fan, when she switches in midstream:

*Julieta*: Tava aqui te olhando. ... Você estudou medicina onde?  
*Romeu*: Na USP.

*Julieta*: Ah, eu fiz Psicologia lá! ... Ah, lembrei! Claro, você era aquele calouro fanático por futebol... que só ia à aula vestido com aquela camiseta do ... [Julieta kicks her mother under the table] ... Palmeiras!<sup>5</sup>

*Isabella*: Funny ... I feel like I know you. Where did you study?

*Romeu*: University of São Paulo.

*Isabella*: I studied psychology there. ... I remember! You were that soccer fanatic freshmen ... that always came to class wearing the jersey of the ... [Julieta kicks her mother under the table] ... Palmeiras!

Then Isabella takes her stand with her daughter, against her husband:

*Isabella* - Mas justo um corinthiano, filha?

*Julieta*: Mãe, eu não escolhi. Aconteceu!

*Isabella*: Não quero saber o que vai acontecer quando o seu pai descobrir.

*Julieta*: Você não, òs! A senhora também entrou neste jogo. Entrei de susto!

*Isabella*: Mas essa mentira não pode continuar. Quer matar o seu pai de desgosto?

*Julieta*: Mãe, è a primeira vez que ... eu me interesse de verdade por alguém. Me ajuda!

*Isabella*: Mas eu nunca menti pro seu pai.<sup>6</sup>

*Isabella*: A Corinthians fan, Juliet?

*Julieta*: I didn't choose. It happened.

*Isabella*: What's gonna happen when your father finds out?

*Julieta*: You're a part of this too.

*Isabella*: Only because of you. Juliet this lying can't go on. Your dad will never like that.

*Julieta*: Mom, this is the first time ... I really love someone. Help me!

*Isabella*: But I've never lied to your father.

The third scene is this triptych of Isabella's agency reveals her ability to say one thing and mean another. She does not lie, but she avoies the truth:

*Alfredo Baragatti*: Belinha, o dia que eu tanto temia chegou!

*Isabella*: Como assim? Que dia?

*Alfredo*: Você não percebeu, Isabela?

*Isabella*: Percebi o quê?

*Alfredo*: A nossa "bambina" ... se apaixonou! Você não viu o jeito que ela olha pra ele? Logo, logo, vamos ficar os doissozinhos aqui nesta casa.

*Isabella*: Deus te ouça! Tomara que tudo dê certo! Que ela possa seguir o caminho dela, não è?

*Alfredo*: Tô te desconhecendo! Você, querendo ver tua filha nica pelas costas?<sup>7</sup>

*Alfredo*: The day I feared so much has come.

*Isabella*: What do you mean? What day?

*Alfredo*: Didn't you notice, Isabella?

*Isabella*: What was there to notice?

*Alfredo*: Our "bambina" ... She's in love! Didn't you see the way she looks at him? Soon, it will be just the two of us in this house.

*Isabella*: May God hear you! I hope she follows her heart!

*Alfredo*: I don't get it. You want your only daughter to leave?

Unlike Lady Capulet, Isabella wants her daughter to follow her heart, not the money or position. Her final act of agency is a combination of Juliet and Lady Capulet. It occurs when Isabella finally explodes on a basketball court, saying how much she has always hated her husband's crazy passion for football.

*Alfredo*: Mulher nenhuma pode ser feliz ao lado de um corinthiano.

*Isabella*: Muito menos ao lado de um palmeirense!

*Alfredo*: Que  $\Theta$  isso agora, Belinha?

*Isabella*: Só o que te importa é o futebol, não é? Sua grande paixão. Vocês não sabem o que é ser casada com esse homem. Eu vivo a base de calmantes. Eu odeio futebol! Eu odeio! Odeio! ... Só o que te interessa é a tua opinião e o teu



time! Ju, esquece que você tem pai e vai viver a tua vida! Ele não merece a tua consideração!

*Alfredo*: Belinha, não faz isso comigo! Olha o meu coração!

*Isabella*: Deixa de cena, Alfredo! Se você tem mesmo coração ... perdoa tua filha e deixa ela ser feliz!

*Alfredo*: No woman can be happy with a Corinthians fan.

*Isabella*: Much less with a Palmeiras fan!

*Alfredo*: What's this, Isabella?

*Isabella*: All you care about is soccer. You don't know what it's like to be married to this man! I'm constantly on sedatives! I hate soccer! Hate it! Hate it! Hate it! All that matters is your team! Forget your father and live your life. He doesn't deserve any consideration!

*Alfredo*: Don't do this to me! To my heart!

*Isabella*: Stop making a scene! If you really have a heart... forgive your daughter and let her be happy!

Here Isabella she shows a bit of the spark that Lady Capulet showed when she offered to poison Romeo in Mantua. She risks all for her daughter in the climax of the Brazilian version. She defies her husband, shaming everyone into recognizing the craziness of the hatred that everyone's soccer obsession has caused. Unlike Juliet, Isabella solves the plot, without anyone getting killed. The result is a sophisticated, adult comedy typical of the mature, modern way that Brazilian cinema and television has adopted Shakespeare to Brazilian culture.

## Notes

1. This article is based on a talk titled "Juliet's Mother" given at the University of Bahia, Salvador, Brazil, November 14, 2010.
2. Albright (39) says Lady Capulet stresses Paris's good looks; "trying to cast an erotic halo around Paris for pragmatic reasons" she uses "veiled, metaphorical, even lascivious" language, but does not comment on the difficulty of what she is doing and the resulting strain on her.
3. Monique Pittman notes that *She's the Man* (2006), a version of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, "pulses with the Title IX Girl Power that found cinematic voice and financial reward in *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002)" (p. 114). In *10 Things I Hate about You*, the update of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*, Cat also plays soccer.
4. Transcripts of the English and Portuguese text of "O Casamento" was downloaded from <http://subscene.com/brazilian-portuguese/casamento-de-romeu-e-julieta-o/subtitle-44958.aspx>. This scene starts at 00:24:41 in the movie.
5. This scene starts at 00:28:02 in the movie.
6. This scene starts at 00:28:38 in the movie.
7. This scene starts at 00:29:19 in the movie.

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