

Romeo and Juliet

Read the following extract from Act 1 Scene 1 of *Romeo and Juliet* and then answer the question that follows.

At this point in the play, the male servants of the house of Capulet have seen the male servants from the house of Montague and a fight is about to start.

	SAMPSON My naked weapon is out. Quarrel, I will back thee.
	GREGORY How, turn thy back and run?
	SAMPSON Fear me not.
	GREGORY No, marry, I fear thee!
5	SAMPSON Let us take the law of our sides, let them begin.
	GREGORY I will frown as I pass by, and let them take it as they list.
	SAMPSON Nay, as they dare. I will bite my thumb at them, which is disgrace to them if they bear it.
	ABRAM Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?
	SAMPSON I do bite my thumb, sir.
10	ABRAM Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?
	SAMPSON [<i>Aside to Gregory</i>] Is the law of our side if I say ay?
	GREGORY [<i>Aside to Sampson</i>] No.
	SAMPSON No, sir, I do not bite my thumb at you, sir, but I bite my thumb, sir.

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Starting with this conversation, explore how Shakespeare presents aggressive male behaviour in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents aggressive male behaviour in this conversation
- how Shakespeare presents aggressive male behaviour in the play as a whole.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]

TURN OVER FOR RESPONSES

Romeo and Juliet Response Grade 5

One of the ways in which Shakespeare presents the theme of aggressive male behaviour is through the use of language that has sexual connotations in this extract. When Sampson says that his 'naked weapon is out', the character is referring to his genitalia since the adjective 'naked' gives an identification of what he is suggesting. The reason why we as a 21st century audience would see such language as part of aggressive male behaviour in this play is because it would be used as an insult towards the enemy regarding his masculinity, since one's genitals would be a sign of manly strength. Thus, it also relates to male aggressiveness. Similarly, sexual language can be found elsewhere in the play when Mercutio uses it to drag Romeo back to the group of Montagues since he runs back to the Capulet mansion for Juliet. Mercutio says words such as, 'open arse' and 'popperin pear' in reference to Romeo's former love with Rosaline. This is also a type of insult since the body of Romeo's former lover is being mocked by Mercutio, and this would display Mercutio's anger towards Romeo for running away.

Apart from sexual language, Shakespeare presents aggressive male behaviour through other forms of insulting language in this extract. The group of Capulet and Montague servants exchange words such as, 'I do bite my thumb'. To us, as a 21st century audience, this would be seen as an equivalent to the middle finger. The reason why this insult is used in this unfriendly encounter is because insults can be used to bring anger and hate from both sides, which would then escalate tensions and cause mass fighting. This is why Shakespeare uses insults to present male aggression in this play. Similarly, insults are used by Mercutio when he is wounded by Tybalt in Act 3 of this play. The dying character says, 'a plague on both your houses', and this is seen as a curse from him to cause further trouble between the Montagues and Capulets. This powerful sentence suggested by the noun 'plague' displays his anger and fury after he is injured by Tybalt. However, insults were usually exchanged between the two houses, now an insult is being addressed to both of the houses.

Shakespeare presents aggressive male behaviour in the extract by portraying men to have the willingness to fight each other and not back away from hostility this forms a significant strength to men. In this extract Gregory asks the question, 'How, turn thy back and run?' which suggests to his companion that there is no reason to 'run' from this fight between the servants of the opposing house. If there was a crisis of masculinity for one of the men, he would've run away from the fight, but none did showing that their bravery is an important part of their aggressive male behaviour. Shakespeare presents the will for fighting further on in the play when Tybalt identifies a few Montague intruders in Act 1. During the party, Tybalt says to Lord Capulet, 'tis a Montague, an enemy of ours'. During a time where family members are expected to have fun and enjoy themselves, Tybalt wants to cause more tension due to his hate of the Montague family members. So Shakespeare presents male behaviour in the play as a whole when Tybalt expresses his will to attack the Montague intruders.

Finally, Shakespeare presents aggressive male behaviour through the theme of obedience and respect. When Sampson says to Abram, 'No sir, I do not bite my thumb at you, Sir, but I bite my thumb, Sir.' What Shakespeare is suggesting over here is that Sampson doesn't insult his companion Gregory but he bites his thumb at the enemy to start a fight. Furthermore, this is seen as an equivocation used by Shakespeare as a play on words, to try to confuse us as an audience as to what

this character is taking about. But Gregory's aggressiveness is shown here as he insults the enemy. Elsewhere in the play, Shakespeare presents aggressive male behaviour through obedience and respect. This is shown in Act 3. Capulet demands Juliet to marry Paris, and she disobeys his order. So he displays his aggressive tone towards his daughter by saying, 'hang thee young baggage, disobedient wretch', which shows that Capulet is angry that he is being disobeyed by someone who is of lower status than him. He is forcing Juliet to leave if she doesn't marry Paris through the use of words such as 'baggage' and the insult 'disobedient wretch'. So Capulet's aggressive male behaviour is presented when Juliet lacks the obedience of him.

Romeo and Juliet Response Grade 8

Even during the Renaissance period, male dominance and violence continued to reside amongst men, as portrayed in the setting of medieval Verona. 'Let us take the law of our sides'. This indication toward opposing sides is reflected in the feud which is central to the play. The noun 'law' weaves in the overriding social law that stemmed from religion and was considered to be the more important law. Both the Montagues and Capulets present these moral laws through defending their honour. Later on in the play, Tybalt defends his family's honour by declaring how he 'hates the word' peace and wants to fight Romeo. Due to these 'feuding families', the male behaviour is seen as violent and aggressive. It is only when Juliet's love makes Romeo 'effeminate' that a more passive, calm atmosphere is projected only to be broken by Romeo's 'fury'. To a Shakespearian audience, this consistent violence was disturbing and unsettling just as it is to a modern day reader. Contrary to moral law during the 16th Century period, modern readers recognised this behaviour as violent and aggressive.

Not only did moral law dictate behaviour, but social construct was a driving force of the play, emphasising Shakespeare's disapproval of the upper class. Throughout this conversation, Sampson and Gregory repeat the phrase 'bite my thumb'. Under 16th century social construct, this offensive act is clearly a common act providing a glimpse into social attitudes at the time. The verb 'bite' evokes a somewhat violent atmosphere as the audience is left with strong imagery. Themes of violence are also presented later on in the play when Lord Capulet claims he will make Juliet 'starve' on the street and threatens to 'drag' her by a cart. This strong imagery is disturbing to a 21st Century audience as this extreme violence is unheard of in modern society. However, during medieval Verona this mistreatment of women and threatening aggression from male relatives was common. As a result of this, strong images of male violence are consistent throughout the play.

The use of male violence towards women can also be seen in male characters throughout the play. Following vicious stereotypes, sexual violence was a disturbingly common act in the play and medieval Verona. Metaphorically, for a sword, 'my naked weapon is out'. This metaphor has violent undertones as the noun 'weapon' is used. This creates an atmosphere of fear amongst the women of Verona as well as an unnerving and disturbing one for modern day readers. This form of male violence is portrayed through euphemisms not just amongst men, but also the women. This suggests that sexual violence, as humour was so common that it was viewed as the norm. When talking to Juliet about ' [her] maidenhood', the nurse uncovers strong social attitudes towards the treatment of women as property, promoting a modern day audience's recognition of the violent and aggressive male behaviour.

Even though male society dominated women, their main aggression was changed towards their male counterparts. Male honour was considered of most importance as to 'turn thy back and run' was shameful. During this period in medieval Verona the defence of your name and honour was vital to the maintenance of your social status. The verbs 'turn' and 'run' evoke strong violent undertones as they provide strong imagery of 'violent ends'. This is later seen when Tybalt challenges Romeo but he refuses – an act that was shameful and resulted in a loss of honour. As a result, Mercutio dies and curses the feud. This dramatic fall in energy subsequent to his death portrays the devastating effects this violent feud had on all members of society. This creates strong disgust amongst a modern audience as it illustrates the 'star-crossed' fate of all the members as they suffocate in the feud. This consistent violence driven by the feud promotes the strong aggressive male behaviour seen throughout the play.