



UNIVERSIDADE ESTADUAL DA PARAÍBA

CAMPUS I

CENTRO DE EDUCAÇÃO

CURSO DE LETRAS INGLÊS

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THE POLITICAL CONTEXT AND ITS INFLUENCE ON ROMEO AND JULIET

CAMPINA GRANDE

AGOSTO DE 2017

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Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso (TCC) apresentado na Universidade Estadual da Paraíba (UEPB) como requisito para obtenção do título de Licenciatura Plena em Letras, com habilitação em Língua Inglesa, sob a orientação do Professor Me. Valécio Irineu Barros.

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L732p Lima, Thaís
The political context and its influence on Romeo and Juliet
[manuscrito] / Thaís Lima. - 2017.
18 p.

Digitado.
Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso (Graduação em Letras
Inglês) - Universidade Estadual da Paraíba, Centro de Educação,
2017.
"Orientação: Prof. Me. Valécio Irineu Barros, Departamento
de Letras e Artes".

1. Literatura 2. Políticas 3. Sociedade I. Título.

21. ed. CDD 820


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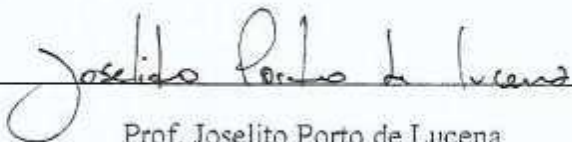
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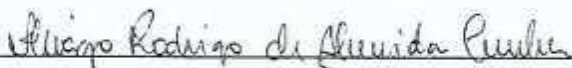
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2016

This paper is offered to my family and friends that always gave me support to believe in my dreams.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to firstly thank God for this gift, which is to have the opportunity to study and learn and to my professors especially “Valécio Irineu Barros” and “Karyne Soares” for all their help during my degree. Their continued support throughout the course was a great motivation to make me produce my paper the best I could! And also my other teachers during my whole student life. My sincere thanks also to the professors of the Examination board, Joselito Lucena e Thiago Almeida. Thank you also to my friends, especially Eduarda Gomes de Moraes that always stayed with me during these years, working together and Vivian Reis who was an inspiration for me, helped me choose my course of modern languages. My heartfelt thanks to my family for all their support during my time at university. And my idols (Axl Rose, Chris Martin, Michael Jackson) that inspirited me to want to learn english language. I could not have reached my goals without you all. Thank you from the bottom of my heart! God Bless you all!

“The human being is in the most literal sense a political animal, not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society.”

Karl Marx

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THE POLITICAL CONTEXT AND ITS INFLUENCE ON ROMEO AND JULIET

Thaís Lima

ABSTRACT

Throughout time politics has been very important to society, establishing rights, duties and rules. Literature often represents these political and historical aspects in its universe. William Shakespeare brought to his work, elements such as: love, family, politics, revenge and characters that goes through kings that could do anything to reach and keep power, to love tragedies. Based on bibliographical theories by Secara (2010) and Levin & Redhead (2007), who discuss the politics during the Renaissance and the Elizabethan Age, the main objective of this paper is to analyze how those questions affect society, and relationships in Shakespeare's famous tragedy "*Romeo and Juliet*" (1597).

Keywords: Shakespeare. Romeo and Juliet. Politics.

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this research paper is to study William Shakespeare's most famous love tragedy: *Romeo and Juliet* (1597). The story takes place in the medieval Verona, Italy, but the play was created during the Renaissance, an important period in Western history, whose impact is still relevant to our century, because it was the time of new concepts, ideas, feelings, thoughts and rules. Yet, the society that produced them was extremely different from ours nowadays, especially when it came to the social role of women. They did not have the right to vote or to choose their future husbands, and they were expected to take care of their houses and children.

Although Romeo and Juliet have always been studied because of their love, the aim of this research paper is to investigate what circumstances made their love become a tragedy by considering aspects such as the influences of their families, the political rules of the time they lived in, the importance of political alliances, and, women's rights during the Renaissance and the Elizabethan Age.

It is relevant to look throughout these questions and other aspects that involve Romeo and Juliet, because this way it is possible to see the impact that political disputes, society and its rules have in building certain conceptions in people's mind and having them, act according to pre-established exceptions. Yet, sometimes, there are people who confront established laws and rules. It is the case of Romeo and Juliet that fought against their parents, sworn enemies, in order to stay together, although their attempt ended up in tragedy.

Politics and the fights for obtaining power involved most powerful people, and some families were enemies. In Shakespeare's play, the Montagues and Capulets were traditional Veronese families, and kept a long lasting feud, for reasons not specified by the author, but which we claim to be rivalry.

In spite of this reality, nothing prevented Romeo and Juliet's love from happening, once the feeling between them was so strong since they met for the first time. The enmity in their families did not make them give up loving and being loved. It was difficult at the time to stay with a person for love, but for Romeo and Juliet there seemed to be no limits. They went over everything for love, to the point of sacrificing their lives, which eventually brought about peace between their families.

In order to study these issues, we will use a bibliographical research, defined by Moreira and Caleffe (2006) as the one that is based on published material, such as books and academic papers. Forward in this paper, divided in four topics, we will describe the Politics in 16th century Italy, the context of Romeo's and Juliet's families and the fated couple's love and deaths, with the purpose of showing how these aspects influenced the development of the play.

2. Politics in Italy in the 16th century

Throughout the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries, Europe was living a new era called 'Renaissance', a French word that means 'rebirth'. It was a period of important changes, in which new ideas about the functions and values of society began to circulate. The main facts which influenced the Renaissance, was the contact with other cultures. It spread faster in Italy and later in other European countries, because of remaining Feudalism and wars.

According to Levin, Moline & Redhead (2007), during the Renaissance, people started to believe that they could improve their lives through hard work. They began to change their minds about what their parents and ancestors believed, which was that every person had no right to grow in life and should keep living in the same condition as they did in the past. Those who were born poor; never had the opportunity to progress in life, and were expected always to be treated as servants.

During the Renaissance, families used to be extended, i.e. all members of the family lived together in the same house. The father was the manager of the house, the mother had to do the

house work and take care of the children and the husband. The whole family helped in the work of running their businesses or farms. At that time children were not treated as children, they had to behave like the adults, respect their parents and follow their rules until their deaths.

Through the Renaissance, most part of the marriages were arranged. This was made to create political and financial alliances between families. Young girls were supposed to marry by the age of sixteen, while men generally married in their thirties or early forties.

Many political, social and intellectual transformations emerged from the Renaissance. The feudal structure and the Roman Catholic Church broke up with the consolidation of nations that were developing their monarchies and languages. At that time Italy had city-states, the economy was based on trades between East and West, and every city-state had their own political structures and rules.

The people of this time were highly conditioned by the society in which they lived, and that means that they did not have the right to choose what they wanted, did not have freedom or had it in a limited way, especially women.

In the next chapter we shall present some aspects of the Elizabethan Age, the time when William Shakespeare became a famous writer and also innovated the theater, helping to build a new culture.

3. The Elizabethan Age

The Renaissance and the 16th century were larger historical periods that involved the whole of Europe, bringing a new perspective about the way of seeing and living in society. Within this larger period, in England, where Shakespeare was born, occurred a shorter, but glorious, period called the 'Elizabethan Age' (1558-1603), which brought to England political, social and economic maturity.

Despite the fact that the sovereign of England was an independent and smart woman, the Elizabethans had strict rules. It was very important to preserve the honor, as the Elizabethan Culture was patriarchal just as the Renaissance culture before it: Men controlled their wives and daughter; Elizabethan women were raised to believe that they were inferior to men; they had to be submissive and could not work or study; they were supposed to obey their husbands and take care of the house.

Both in the Renaissance and, in the Elizabethan Age, women were seen physically and emotionally as the "weaker sex". They were considered not to have the ability to do things men do. This fact explains how women's rights were limited in terms of education, how they did not have much say in marriage, how most women could not choose a profession and had to be housewives, and why they were strict in regard to religious duties. Women did not experience the same right as men when it came to education; They were not allowed to attend any type of school; they were only permitted to have private tutors at home; They were restricted from entering professions such as law, medical field, politics etc. All they were allowed to do was cook and clean; or any type of work considered as housework. The status of a woman was very low during this period, especially in terms of opportunities, as men were considered the heads of the households.

In the play *Romeo and Juliet*, Sampson who is a Capulet's servant makes it clear that they consider women weak, as shown in this part: "SAMPSON: True; and therefore women, being the weaker vessels, are ever thrust to the wall: therefore I will push Montague's men from the wall, and thrust his maids to the wall". (Act I, scene I). We can analyze in this part, that there is also a sexual assault: when Sampson says that women will be pushed to the wall, it is explicit that it is related to aggressive sex they see women like weak objects, which only serves to satisfy their wishes.

At that time, men used to believe that women were weak vessels, the weaker sex. This, thought is still present nowadays, in some sexist and patriarchal societies, in which many men still continue to see women as reproductive beings, whose function is only taking care of family and home. In some societies women still do not have active voice, they do not have the right to show their opinion and wishes; they cannot even work or study. This has been changing throughout time, with the social movements, like Feminism, which wants and fights for the social, political and economic equality of the sexes.

Both in the Renaissance and in the Elizabethan Age, women had to marry virgin, it was considered the most important virtue, and they didn't have the right to choose their husbands, only if they were from lower classes. Notice that the importance of virginity is expressed in *Romeo and Juliet* in the following part: "BENVOLIO: "Then she hath sworn that she will still live chaste" (Act I, scene I). Notwithstanding this context, Elizabeth I never got married, because she thought that marriage could be a loss of power, and also as political strategy: she had to remain available for marriage and possible alliance with different thrones of Continental Europe. Thus, she was named "The Virgin Queen" even though she had an affair with Robert Dudley.

At that time, politics and, the desire to conquer lands and be richer and powerful, was very important. It was not different with Queen Elizabeth I, that ran England and Ireland for a long time. The Elizabethan Age was considered a golden age for England there was a great sense of importance to 'nationalism', which build a fertile ground for literature, and during this period, one of the most famous writers of the world, William Shakespeare, produced his timeless work.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, we see an illustration of the Italian life in the 16th century, reflected in the way love and marriage were based upon political alliances and seen as a means of improving the family's fortune. When women married, all the money they had was given to the husband, and they had no idea of how it was to be spent. The family of the woman had to pay a dowry to the husband's family, a dowry was an amount of money, goods and property. After marriage women officially became a property of their husbands, as the law gave a husband unquestionable rights over his wife.

According to Secara (2010) wedding was allowed to boys by the age of 14, and to girls at 12, although it was not recommended so early. In lower classes, men married at 25-26 and women about 23. Since noble families arranged marriages earlier to their children, to establish an alliance, Juliet Capulet was supposed to marry by the age of 14, as shown in this excerpt:

LADY CAPULET Well, think of marriage now, younger than you, Here in Verona, ladies of esteem, are made already mothers: by count, I was your mother much upon these years that you are now a maid. Thus then in brief: The valiant Paris seeks you for love (Act I, scene III, p.9).

At that time it was deemed foolish to marry for love. To the families it was more important and profitable to consider other interests.

In the next topic we shall present Romeo's and Juliet's families, their main members and how they had impact upon the star-crossed lovers' tragic lives.

4. Romeo's and Juliet's families

According to Gibson (1999), the Montagues and Capulets were powerful families in Verona, Italy, and vied with each other to see which one would be the most powerful in the city.

The Montagues were the family of Romeo. Montague was Romeo's father and was married to Lady Montague. Head of the Montague clan, he was locked in a battle with the

Capulets. He knew that Romeo was a young melancholic guy, as shown in the beginning of the play.

An important member of this family was Lady Montague, Romeo's mother, who died in sadness when her son was banished. Romeo Montague was a romantic and sensitive young man. Apart from Montagues and Capulets, in the court of Verona there were some important members and one of them was Friar Lawrence, a Franciscan friar, friend to both Romeo and Juliet, who was kind, civic-minded, a proponent of moderation, and always ready with a plan. Friar Lawrence secretly married the impassioned lovers in hope that the union might eventually bring peace to Verona. Besides being a Catholic holy man, Friar Lawrence was also an expert in the use of seemingly mystical potions and herbs.

The Capulets were the family of Juliet. Capulet was the head of the clan, married to Lady Capulet and father of Juliet. He was a man who had power and demanded respect. He loved his daughter, Juliet's hand wanted her to marry Paris, a kinsman of the Prince.

Lady Capulet, Juliet's mother was distanced from her daughter, so that Juliet received most of her moral guidance and affection from the Nurse. Lady Capulet, who also married young, believed it was the right time for Juliet to marry and, like her husband believed that Paris would be the most appropriate suitor.

Juliet used to have very little freedom, but she was connected to the outside world through her closest friend, the Nurse. A friend she was prepared to abandon when the Nurse turned against Romeo.

The Montagues and the Capulets were enemies, at the time, Middle Ages, pre Renaissance in northern Italy, it was very common for rivalry to exist between families for the sake of power, prestige, trade etc. Beside the violent disputes, whenever someone died, and prefaced the 'revenge', someone in the family would avenge the death by killing someone from the other family, who retaliated. It is in this context that Romeo and Juliet, sons of enemy families, fall in a tragic impossible love.

However, the rivalry between the families contributed for the love of Romeo and Juliet, because young people usually feel attracted for impossible and dangerous situations, especially when it represents the chance of living a risky, but real love. In view of this, the main obstacles to Romeo and Juliet's love were the political and physical fights between the Montagues and Capulets.

Similarly to *Romeo and Juliet*, *Titus Andronicus* (1584) also tells a story about two families. The author Catherine Belsey compares the two Shakespearean plays, when she states:

Titus Andronicus is a play about two families, each unhappy in its own way. Oddly enough, the same observation applies in different terms to several of Shakespeare's tragedies. It fits, for instance, *Romeo and Juliet*, where the violence between Montagues and Capulets destroys the children of both. (2013:124).

She makes another comparison between these two stories, by adding that: “As the play *Titus Andronicus*, *Romeo and Juliet* is a history about appropriation of woman, patriarchal power and family feuds” (2013:124).

As the author says both plays are about ambitious families, which can do anything to be more powerful. And in both there is the patriarchal power. The wish to always have more richness makes people fight against each other and it always results in tragedy. In *Romeo and Juliet* the lovers confront their parents to stay together. Juliet's father tries his best to form an alliance of power with Prince Paris, although it is an unsuccessful attempt.

The following topic will present the reason why politics interfered in *Romeo and Juliet*'s love.

5. Why politics interfered in *Romeo and Juliet*'s love

Along this paper we have been talking about the Renaissance period and, at the same time, about the Elizabethan Age, a short but an important period to England's history. We have also pointed out the political rules for the people during those times, the limited rights of the women, and their main obligations, the role of man, the way people had to live and the consequences of it, as well as other aspects.

Historians defend that the Renaissance was the time during which the human qualities flourished. In the political context, occurred the end of the feudal system, the growth of the cities, and gradual rise of the bourgeoisie, with the expansion of trade and the early developments in industry. The England of Shakespeare was a small reign, a rural land, but it was the England of Queen Elizabeth I, who developed the country, bringing it prosperity and peace.

All these aspects had a great influence in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare lived during the Renaissance, although the play is set in the Middle Ages, pre Renaissance time. Yet, there were same rules applied for women of both periods, and the

ambition for richness was the same, just like it is nowadays. Power was very important for the society, as it influenced people to behave differently. Those who had power had the influence; they could influence people's lives. As Mokkan and Stokan (1976) say "*Power and influence are introduced as the capacity to determine the actions of others in accordance with the will or the purposes of the holder of power or influence*". In this way we can see that clearly Romeo and Juliet were victims of the influences of their families, which exercised power in their lives.

In this context, it is possible to affirm that Shakespeare always involves in his plays politicians and its rulers, as this author says: "'Almost all of Shakespeare's tragedies have central characters who take arms against legitimate or established rulers". (p. 103, chapter 6, HATTAWAY, 2002). Not only politics had influences upon Romeo and Juliet, but also the rules of the society they lived in. Romeo's and Juliet's families had an endless feud, in which only hatred prevailed. The Montagues and the Capulets were like present day political parties, but they could never make an alliance, because they were enemies, so it would never be possible for their children to marry each other.

In the Middle Ages most of the countries and cities were governed by kings, emperors, queens and earls. In order to maintain such system, it was crucial for a noble family from a reign or for a rich family to find a better alliance. In order to achieve that, they made their children marry, thus establishing political bonds and increasing their properties and power.

For the protagonists there were some crucial factors that turned their love impossible, such as: family, society and political power. As MOKKEN & STOKMAN (1976) says: "Political power in a social system is the capacity to fix or to change (partly) a set of alternative value allocations for the members of that system or for parts of it". (p.49)

The family represents the first obstacle. As the lovers did not have communication with their parents, they had to follow what their parents wanted for their lives. Juliet, for instance, had to follow her parents' personal desires. The society had a medieval basis, with a fixed social hierarchy: the Prince, the nobles and the servants. In the play, the political power is seen in two parts: the prince's authority and above all the rivalry between the families, the main obstacle to Romeo and Juliet's love.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the work of William Shakespeare had a great importance to the world of tragedies, in addition to bringing to the theatre originality and authenticity. His works made great success and serve as inspiration until now. The story of these lovers reflects the people of the Renaissance, their values and purposes.

Besides that, the story had a historical context, taking us to that time to see how people behaved in the Middle Ages pre Renaissance, when the story happens. It was released in theater during the Renaissance, more precisely during the Reign of Queen Elizabeth I, the Elizabethan Age, when Shakespeare moved the world with *Romeo and Juliet* using the story of these two youngsters to tell that love is the most important thing in the world, and if it is prohibited, it can turn into a tragedy.

With this analysis we assume that the politics can directly affect society, with it thirst for power. Shakespeare goes further, when a simple story brings everything that is always present in the soul of each individual: love and hatred, eternal conflict between good and evil, which lays bare all human frailty, our conflicts and hypocrisies.

O CONTEXTO POLÍTICO E SUA INFLUÊNCIA EM ROMEO E JULIETA

RESUMO

Ao longo do tempo, a política tem sido muito importante para a sociedade, estabelecendo direitos, deveres e regras. A literatura muitas vezes representa esses aspectos políticos e históricos em seu universo. William Shakespeare trouxe para suas obras, elementos como: amor, família, política, vingança e personagens que vão de reis que poderiam fazer qualquer coisa para alcançar e manter o poder, para tragédias de amor. Baseado em teorias bibliográficas de Secara (2010) e Levin & Redhead (2007), que discutem a política no Renascimento e Era Elisabetano, o principal objetivo desse artigo é analisar como essas questões afetam a sociedade, e os relacionamentos na famosa tragédia de Shakespeare “Romeu e Julieta” (1597).

Palavras-chave: Shakespeare. Romeu e Julieta. Política.

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