

19.1 Youth and passion

► 'never was a story of more woe' (5.3.308)

As the Prince says at the end of the play, there's no sadder story than Romeo and Juliet. Here are two young lives cut short; moreover, the two lovers did no obvious wrong. Even though we are led into seeing the events from the viewpoint of the lovers (we want what they want), it's possible to imagine it all from the perspective of the parents and the Prince. This is the function of the final scene; this was a tragedy for two families as well as two people, and a whole city as well as the two families.

Youthfulness

Romeo and Juliet is full of young people. There's Romeo and his friends – young men with money, status, the freedom to wander, to fight, to dream about girls and to take risks by visiting the enemy camp. They have about them the chic of youth – its impudence, its daring, its confidence and its swagger.

There are fewer young women, and one of them – the dream woman, Rosaline – never appears; but Juliet is alive enough – passionate, energetic and sensual.

Passion

Feelings run high throughout the play. There's a lightness and energy about the merry camaraderie of the young men. Listen to Benvolio and Mercutio looking for Romeo:

Benvolio: He ran this way, and leapt this orchard wall.

Call, good Mercutio.

Mercutio: Nay, I'll conjure too.

Romeo! Humours! Madman! Passion! Lover!

(2.1.5–7)

Benvolio evokes Romeo's passion in saying that he leapt the wall, and in a mockery which is never unkind Mercutio ransacks popular beliefs about the strangeness of love and merrily turns them into alternative names for Romeo. We can see in the language that life is a game.

Perhaps though the fiercest feelings come not in the great love duets (for instance, 2.1.91–180) but in the moments when they are alone. Before the duet of Act 2,

scene 1 Juliet has the speech that contains the famous words about the name of a rose not affecting its scent. That speech begins:

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy.
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.

(2.1.80–1)

There's no deliberate forcing of passion, no sense of trying out an emotion (something we all have to do); what's there is the sense of someone passionately working out an important meaning for the first time.

19.2 The comic elements

► 'And if thou dar'st, I'll give thee remedy' (4.1.76)

Those words could have come from a comedy. This is not surprising:

• the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* has a lot in common with comedy.

The role of Friar Lawrence is that of a comic practiser; he devises a clever scheme to bring about the happy ending that the audience wants.

Another comic element is the ball. Romeo's decision to risk going because Rosaline is there is again the kind of stratagem that the young use in comedies to further their aims.

The plot is chiefly comic in its presentation of a bar, imposed by the older generation on the young. The energy of the young, as in most comedies, is directed at getting round restrictions laid down by the older generation.

If the play had ended happily, the audience wouldn't have been surprised.

19.3 Verona divided

► 'The quarrel is between our masters and us their men' (1.1.18)

After the solemn and elevated rhetoric of the Prologue, the play explodes in civil strife – the followers of the Capulets and the Montagues brawl in the street. The words of Gregory above show us that the antagonism is long-established. It has no cause; they quarrel because they quarrel!

There's nothing tired, however, about the brawl. Shakespeare makes the insults bawdy, and this gives a lively, youthful quality to the dialogue. When Sampson says: 'Draw, if you be men' (1.1.59), we know that street fighting is a test of manhood; the aggressive wordplay blends sex and violence. The two great themes of Shakespeare – love and war – are acted out before us. We see war and we hear it spoken about in terms of sexuality.

19.4 Tybalt and hatred

► 'the fiery Tybalt' (1.1.106)

It's difficult to imagine Tybalt existing outside the civil strife of Verona. The conflict makes him what he is. He unquestioningly accepts that war between the Houses is

the right way of life and he hates the alternative. He enters the play when the sensible Benvolio is trying to bring the brawl to an end. His first words are a scornful and snobbish challenge:

What, drawn and talk of peace? I hate the word
As I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee.

(1.1.87–8)

He can't think there's any other purpose to drawing a sword than fighting.

It's worth while asking why Tybalt is given such prominence. The reason is that it's Shakespeare's way of showing that, among other things,

• **this is a social tragedy.**

Tybalt is locked into a way of life that brings about his own death. The lovers are locked into the same world.

19.5 The Nurse

► **'these sorrows make me old' (3.2.89)**

The Nurse is the most enjoyable character in the play. Her frequent remarks about how tired she is provide a welcome relief from the helter-skelter of youthful passion. She acts as a reminder that all passion is eventually spent.

The characterisation of the Nurse is very detailed. She talks a lot; using prose and a very easy, conversational verse. Her talk is colloquial, anecdotal, bawdy, teasing and marked by repetitions. These repetitions give the impression that she's old and well established in the household.

Her love for Juliet seems entirely genuine, and maybe because she's a servant she doesn't press Juliet overmuch with family responsibilities. When she sees Juliet is obviously in love with Romeo, she simply says 'hie you hence to Friar Lawrence' cell' (2.4.68).

The Nurse's role

Within the design of the play, she has a number of important functions. She's the confidante of Juliet, and so is parallel to Friar Lawrence. She's a woman who's seen how passion drives the young, so she raises the question of whether she should have exercised a restraining influence on the lovers. One of the difficulties with the play is that the 'guardian' figures – herself and Friar Lawrence – don't control the lovers or, in her case, lets them down. When she advises Juliet to marry Paris, she not only shows she's not much sense of what marriage is, but also she's no idea how deep Juliet's love for Romeo goes.

19.6 Mercutio and language

► **'thou talk'st of nothing' (1.4.96)**

Mercutio

If the Nurse is the most down to earth character in the play, Mercutio is the most dazzling. He's a very confident, clever young man, who expresses his masculinity in glittering language.

He can be scornful and bawdy (what else can we expect from a clever young man?). He enjoys the racy language of the streets; he calls Tybalt 'Prince of cats' (2.3.18), he mocks the Petrarchan conventions that he sees Romeo following (2.3.35–43) and he bawdily jokes about 'a great natural that runs loling up and down to hide his bauble in a hole' (2.3.84–5).

The Queen Mab speech

But in the Queen Mab speech he does something else – paints in words with the delicacy and impudent skill of an Elizabethan miniaturist. As with so much Shakespeare, we have to *hear* the flood of words:

Her wagon spokes made of long spinner's legs;
The cover, of the wings of grasshoppers;
Her traces, of the moonshine's watery beams;
Her collars, of the smallest spider web

(1.4.60–3)

He spins the words with an awareness of how important the succession of sounds is; think how satisfying 'long spinner's legs' is to the ear.

Mercutio is an observer, a commentator and an artist who steps back from the rush of life to produce art which is cool and slightly impersonal. In this he's a living comment on the impetuous Romeo. And he's needed. Romeo in both of his lover's guises is sometimes difficult to take.

Mercutio's death

The irony is that Mercutio dies when he gets involved. Shakespeare ensures that Mercutio is unaware of how the plot has developed. This leads to the ghastly mistake of Mercutio's death. Romeo is married, but no one knows. Because he's married to Juliet he's related to Tybalt, so isn't going to be provoked by senseless insults. Mercutio thinks this is 'vile submission' (3.1.72), so fights and is killed. What is to be made of his dying words?

A plague o' both your houses.
They have made worms' meat of me.

(3.1.106–7)

Is this one of those things that the audience feel needs to be said? From his slightly distanced perspective, Mercutio can say that the dispute is absurd. Is he right to protest or is it wrong of him to make his last words to his friend a curse?

19.7 The love scenes

► **'my heart's dear love' (2.2.57)**

Rosaline

Rosaline is the most prominent example of that very interesting group of the characters – the ones we never meet. She's Romeo's Petrarchan mistress: a great beauty

who's vowed not to love (1.1.205–21). Rosaline is significant because of what Romeo feels, not because of what she's like. Some have wondered whether they've even met.

Because nothing is known of her character, Mercutio enjoys joking about her. The point of his bawdy joking is that whatever she is, she's certainly a woman, hence his merry jests about her beautiful body:

By her fine foot, straight leg, and quivering thigh,
And the demesnes that there adjacent lie

(2.1.19–20)

Three further things need to be said about her:

- Romeo feels leaden ('I have a soul of lead' – 1.4.15) with his love for her; when he meets Juliet, he leaps over the orchard wall.
- She anticipates Juliet not only as an object of love but as a Capulet (1.2.69–70).
- If Juliet had lived, might she too have been a passing phase in Romeo's love-history?

We want to say 'No' to the last question, but this might only show the very strong hold that love ending in death has upon audiences.

The love sonnet

Shakespeare stages the meeting of Romeo and Juliet to bring out the themes of love and war; their words of love immediately follow Tybalt's of hate. The presence of the two men on the crowded stage also anticipates the crisis of the play – Romeo killing Tybalt.

The merriment of the dance and the hatred of Tybalt contrast with the finely turned love sonnet (1.5.92–104), which forms their first dialogue. Sonnets (poems of 14 lines and an intricate rhyme scheme) were Italian in origin and were often about love.

Petrarch wrote sonnets, and what's exchanged in dialogue between them is pretty Petrarchan – lovers are pilgrims, and beloveds the saints whose shrines they travel to worship at. (See 1.10 and 2.11.)

What's the effect of this? Poetry (art) expresses love (nature). Most people begin with raw feeling and try to raise it the level of art. *Romeo and Juliet* starts with what most have to struggle for. Shakespeare might be suggesting two things:

- **although their love is brief they reach a perfect balance of form and feeling;**
- **love that is so finely turned can only exist in the form of isolated moments; this means it couldn't exist in the everyday world.**

The orchard

In Shakespeare's day the orchard scene (Act 2, Scene 1) would have been performed with Romeo on the stage and the boy playing Juliet on the balcony. There is, therefore, no physical contact.

Shakespeare is depending on the audience recognising the convention that whatever is spoken by a character who is unaware that anybody else is on stage must be true. We must also assume that Romeo believes that, and so hears that she thinks he has in himself 'that dear perfection' (2.1.88). She says what she feels, and he hears what he wants to hear.

What troubles Juliet is the social and political nature of love. In this she's different from Romeo. He's only said one thing about love across the Montague–Capulet

divide (1.5.117); it's left to her to work out that social divisions need not prevent love, because the beloved's name – a social indicator – 'is no part of thee' (2.1.90).

Juliet takes the lead. She asks: 'dost thou love me?' (2.1.132). She also proposes marriage (2.1.184–90). She's very like the comic heroine who ventures into danger for love. Throughout the play she's determined and decisive. Romeo, by contrast, is still playing the role of the lover. When he insists on swearing to confirm his love, Juliet is much more sensible: 'Do not swear at all' (2.1.154).

While he poses, she's aware that what she's doing isn't an act. She says she knows she ought to 'frown, and be perverse, and say thee nay' (2.1.138), because that's what beloveds do. But since he's heard her 'true-love passion' (2.1.146), all she can say is that he won't think her yielding is due to 'light love' (2.1.147).

Shakespeare seems keen to bring out that this love is deeply felt. He does this through a dialogue towards the end in which she admits that 'I have forgot why I did call thee back' (2.1.215). This is what we want to see; the artless admission that her heart and head are so full, she can't control her thoughts:

I shall forget, to have thee still stand there,
Rememb'ring how I love thy company.

(2.1.217–18)

That's real, natural and even embarrassingly common.

Juliet's passion

Shakespeare chooses to show sexual desire more fully present in Juliet than Romeo. This is most evident in her soliloquy, anticipating her wedding night (3.2.1–31). It opens with a conventional symbol of desire – galloping horses – and openly talks of the act of love as a game played 'for a pair of stainless maidenhoods' (3.2.13). She coaxingly says 'Come night, come Romeo' (3.2.17), and gives the elevated Petrarchan language of light and love as a religion a distinctly sexual twist:

Lovers can see to do their amorous rites
By their own beauties

(3.2.8–9)

What Shakespeare gives Juliet is the intense sexual longing of a young girl in love and a maturity concerning the place of love in life. Juliet knows that sex is right. She has an extraordinary image of the dark night as a matron, who will conceal her in darkness till what she does in darkness will become what befits a married lady:

till strange love grown bold
Think true love acted simple modesty.

(3.2.15–16)

She wants the act of love to be a natural part of her life, not something that has to be hidden.

In her exploration of the language of love she plays upon the word 'die'. In Shakespeare's day, this had the additional meaning of sexual consummation. This sense is behind

Give me my Romeo, and when I shall die
Take him and cut him out in little stars

(3.2.21–2)

The meaning must be that dying is her orgasm. What we may also note is the eerie juxtaposition of love and death (see 19.9).

The parting

The parting scene is brief; Romeo exits at line 59. They are together again only in the tomb.

This is the most convincing of all their scenes, because it's rather trivial, they spend most of it playing a game about whether the bird they can hear is a nightingale or a lark. This triviality makes the scene convincing. At the end of the orchard scene Juliet says 'parting is such sweet sorrow' (2.1.229), and so it is to those who know they'll meet again. But Romeo is going into banishment. It's not surprising that at such moments – the last goodbyes – there's nothing much to say. It's like going to war; the thought that they may never meet again so fills the mind that the tongue can only speak trivia.

19.8 Coping with banishment

► 'I must be gone and live, or stay and die' (3.5.11)

Banishment and elopement

That is how Romeo sums up his dilemma. He's been banished from Verona and must go to Mantua.

What's interesting is that neither of the lovers think of doing what everyone in a comedy would immediately do – elope. When they plan their marriage, she says:

And follow thee, my lord, throughout the world.
(2.1.190)

But neither of them thinks of eloping. It might be because of family pressure, or that because Friar Lawrence hasn't suggested it, Romeo wouldn't do it. More convincing is that elopement is not in keeping with Romeo's chosen role. He decides he's 'fortune's fool' (3.1.136), and that's the part he's going to play with energetic relish.

19.9 Love and death

► 'Here in the dark to be his paramour' (5.3.105)

Like opera and much literature, *Romeo and Juliet* is

- a story of love and death.

This note is first struck by the Chorus:

The fearful passage of their death-marked love
(Prologue, 9)

The inseparability of desire and death surfaces in the first scene. The servants jeer at each other in sexual and military terms. On a symbolic level, this link blights Romeo in the crisis of Act 3, Scene 1; as a married man his libido should be reserved for his wife, but the death of his friend makes him use the weapon of violence.

By the time he comes to part from Juliet, the Petrarchan language of lover's parting as a kind of death is beginning to feel more of a reality than an image. He outlandishly says:

Come, death, and welcome; Juliet wills it so.
(3.5.24)

and she has a kind of vision of Romeo 'dead in the bottom of a tomb' (3.5.56). When they do meet in the tomb, Romeo sees that Juliet is death's bride:

Shall I believe
That unsubstantial death is amorous,
And that the lean abhorred monster keeps
Thee here in dark to be his paramour.
(5.3.102–5)

There may be irony here at Romeo's expense; death in this play is anything but 'unsubstantial', it's a very solid presence.

19.10 Their tragedy

► 'now at once run on/The dashing rocks' (5.3.117–18)

In the light of the interweaving of love and death, it may be possible to say something about the nature of their tragedy. There are a number of strands to it.

Verona

Romeo is banished to Mantua, but given the situation in Verona, it's hard to see a future for the lovers.

Impetuosity

One of the functions of Friar Lawrence is to signal this in the marriage scene:

These violent delights have violent ends
(2.5.9)

In the light of the fact that violent love can turn to violent loathing, he advises 'love moderately' (2.5.14). This is impossible for Romeo.

The death wish

Throughout the play there's the image of a perilous sea journey. In the orchard scene Romeo says that although 'I am no pilot ... I should adventure' (2.1.124–6)

Fate

This wilful element, the element of the death-wish, should be balanced by the hints of fate. Friar Lawrence says that Romeo is 'wedded to calamity' (3.3.3).

Youth

We should resist turning the play into a theory about human life, so rather than deciding for one or any of these ideas, we shall merely point to another:

- **Romeo and Juliet are young.**

Their youth might help to make sense of some of the other elements. Romeo is impetuous and Juliet has that decisiveness that goes with a narrow experience of life.

The attraction of death is something that afflicts the young. (That classic number of the teenage death-wish, 'Leader of the Pack' by the Shangri-Las, is still played on the radio.) Fate is present in that things are against them, but in choosing not to elope, it looks as if they too willingly play the role of the 'star-crossed lovers' (Prologue, 6). Their tragedy might simply be that they are young.

Exercises

- 19.1 Do you agree that Juliet is a far more interesting character than Romeo?
- 19.2 What exactly should an audience feel at the end of *Romeo and Juliet* and why?

'Mastering Shakespeare'
Richard Gill (1998)
Published by Palgrave Macmillan

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Hamlet

20.1 Asking questions

► 'Who's there?' (1.1.1)

In the opening scene the soldiers do something fundamental to the play:

- **they ask questions.**

Appropriately, the very first line is in this form; one guard hears a noise and makes the customary challenge. By the end of the play one character, Hamlet, believes that all that happens is within the providence of God (5.2.165), so possibly the question is bigger than the guard thinks. Is there anybody there watching this violent human drama with the compassion of a creator?

What chiefly matters is that the play starts with a question. Questions are only asked when people are uncertain. This is the world of *Hamlet*:

- **a world in which there are many unanswered questions.**

Answerable and unanswerable questions

Some of the questions can be answered. The guards ask why they are on patrol, and Horatio is able to provide an answer. Later the King wants to know where Polonius' body is, and he gets an answer from Hamlet.

Other questions can't be answered easily. Is the Ghost to be believed? Hamlet at first expresses no doubt, but later he feels he has to test what the Ghost has said.

Our questions

The characters ask questions; and so do we. In *Hamlet* Shakespeare turns a subject of drama – characters asking questions – into the way in which the drama itself works. The play provokes audiences to ask questions, such as 'is Hamlet really mad?'

The point about this question is that Shakespeare has not given the audience any real advantage over the other characters. We know that Hamlet said he would put on 'an antic disposition' (1.5.173), but we're no better off than the rest of the characters in knowing whether or not he's pretending to be mad or is actually so.