



Understanding Shakespeare

ROMEO AND
JULIET

ROBERT A. ALBANO

UNDERSTANDING

SHAKESPEARE:

ROMEO

AND

JULIET

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SHAKESPEARE:**

Romeo and Juliet

Robert A. Albano

MERCURYE PRESS

Los Angeles

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First Printing: June 2013

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MERCURY PRESS

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NOTE: All act and scene divisions and lines numbers referred to in this text are consistent with those found in *The Norton Shakespeare* (Stephen Greenblatt, editor).

INTRODUCTION

Romeo and Juliet is undeniably the greatest love story ever told. The story itself has long fascinated and captivated the minds, the hearts, and the imaginations of millions of people over many long centuries. Even before Shakespeare came into the world, the story of Romeo and Juliet was a popular one among readers – at least six different versions of the tale were written before William Shakespeare was even born. Yet the tragedy written by Shakespeare is the version that remains and endures and continues to be performed in numerous theaters all over the globe. Shakespeare's plays are more than just stories: they are also works of art. They are poetry at its finest. Poetry is about capturing intense emotional experiences and rendering those experiences into words. To write poetry well – to create poems that are truly beautiful – is a skill that requires great intelligence as well as an artistic sensitivity. The master poet makes his or her readers feel the emotion in all of its intensity through the sheer power and magic of words. And William Shakespeare was, indeed, a master among master poets. William Shakespeare was and is truly the grand wizard among all of the many poet-magicians who have ever lived and written since the time man first put pen to paper.

Romeo and Juliet is, then, like all of Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies, both a work of drama and a work of poetry. Not only are these plays written in a fine and beautiful poetic form, but all of them center upon **an intense and powerful**

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emotional experience that propels the characters to act in an unusual, uncustomary, and irrational manner. And the actions of these characters thus agitate the situation and plot to such an extreme that the conclusion is often violent as well as tragic. Each of Shakespeare's tragedies focus upon a different intense emotion: in *Othello* that emotion is **jealousy**, in *Macbeth* it is **ambition**, and in *King Lear* it is **anger**. And, of course, in *Romeo and Juliet* that emotion is **love**. The reader should always be mindful, though, that the emotions that form the core of these plays are not the common, everyday sort of emotions. Everybody experiences a multitude of mild and sometimes even strong emotional reactions to situations and events on a daily basis. And most people are capable of controlling these emotional experiences; most people are capable of preventing their emotions from making them act in a manner that they would later regret. Man's intelligence and reason allows him to keep his emotions in check. However, on certain rare occasions, man experiences a severe and sometimes even violent emotional reaction to a situation or event that causes him to lose control. His emotion is so wild and so intense that no matter how intelligent and rational he had always been in the past, his **reason** abandons him and his **emotion** takes over. Man thus becomes a slave to his passions.

Even long before the time of the Renaissance, the political and religious leaders of

the day were quite well aware of **the conflict between reason and emotion**. Church leaders were especially concerned about people allowing their emotions to dictate their actions, for in doing so people often then engaged in acts of sin or crime. Too much hate could lead to murder. Too much lust could lead to adultery. The Church leaders thus asserted the idea that **Reason** was a gift from God that allows all people to control their emotions. For the members of the Church, this concept was absolute. There were no exceptions. A person who thus allowed his emotions to affect him and act against his better judgment (or reason) was, according to the Church, weak. In order to be a good Christian, one needs to be strong and to control his or her emotions at all times. In order to be a good Christian, one needs to appreciate the wonderful gift of **reason** that God has bestowed upon him. People did not want to think of themselves as weak, and they certainly did not want to be ungrateful toward God. After all, that would make them sinners; and then in the afterlife they would have to dwell in Hell for all eternity. So, people accepted the teachings of their Church and attempted to control their emotions.

During the Renaissance a common **metaphor** was used to express the relationship between reason and the emotions. Reason is the **king**, and all of the emotions and passions are that king's **subjects** (or followers). The king controls his subjects, and the subjects should obey their king.

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The people of a kingdom should never attempt to rule or control their king: the emotions should never attempt to rule reason.

In *Romeo and Juliet* love is the emotion that powerfully invades and usurps the position of reason in both of the main characters, Romeo and Juliet. The two young lovers thus behave in a manner that is illogical and irrational because their emotion is so intense. Some commentators on the play have remarked that because Romeo and Juliet are quite young, their behavior is simply a result of their immaturity. Such commentators do not understand Shakespeare or this play at all. Love is (or can be) an extremely powerful emotion that can affect both young and old alike. To establish this point, Shakespeare wrote another play that may serve as a counterpoint to this one. Eleven years after writing *Romeo and Juliet* (in 1595), Shakespeare wrote another play about powerful love: *Antony and Cleopatra* (in 1606). The characters of Antony and Cleopatra, who are also madly and truly in love with each other, act every bit as irrationally and illogically as do Romeo and Juliet. In fact, Antony and Cleopatra act even more unreasonably than their younger counterparts. *Romeo and Juliet* is not a play about young love so much as it is a play about true love. The play is about a love that is deep and powerful. It is about a love that cannot be controlled or denied.

Within the earlier tragedy Shakespeare also provides scenes and situations to indicate that older

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(and supposedly more mature) people are not any better at controlling their emotions than the younger generation. The play of *Romeo and Juliet* is not only about love: it is also about **hate**. Romeo's family, the Montagues, is engaged in a bitter conflict with Juliet's family, the Capulets. Both the Montagues and the Capulets are aristocratic families living in the same city of Verona, Italy, and serving the same prince. As such, they should behave honorably and respectfully toward one another; but they do not. Rather, the two are engaged in a **family feud**. The usual scenario for such a feud is that one member of one of the families kills a member of the other family; and, in revenge, another member of the second family kills a member of the first family. And then the first family wants to get revenge for that death. And so on, and so on. The bitterness and resentment never end, and frequently neither do the killings. People who participate in family feuds are consumed by hatred. They do not act rationally or logically. They do not fully realize that their rash and violent actions are harming not only others, but themselves. Both the Montagues and the Capulets act dishonorably and bring ruin and disaster to all of Verona. But due to the intensity of their hatred, they are unable to control their feelings or to act in a reasonable manner.

Shakespeare perhaps anticipated that not all of his readers and critics would truly understand the intensity of emotion that lies at the heart of his play;

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and, so, the playwright created the figure of **Friar Laurence**. This character functions as the wise and learned advisor to young Romeo. Friar Laurence is a good man as well as an extremely intelligent man. But as a member of the Catholic Church who has sworn to keep a vow of chastity, he has no experience and no real understanding about the kind of love that exists between Romeo and Juliet. And Friar Laurence is not the only adult character who fails to recognize the intensity of the passion between the young lovers. Other characters, such as Juliet's Nurse and Capulet (Juliet's father), also are oblivious to the depth of feeling of the impassioned Juliet. Some people live their entire lives never experiencing the deep love that Romeo and Juliet experience; and other people, apparently, seem to forget ever having had such feelings when other strong emotions, such as the hate that Capulet feels for Montague, drives the other emotions out of their hearts.

Friar Laurence does care for Romeo; and when he sees that his young friend is wild with emotion, he counsels the troubled youth to “**love moderately**” (in Act II, Scene 5). The Friar might just as well be telling the sun to shine less brightly, for all the good that it will do. The Friar is telling his young charge to use his reason and control his emotion; but Shakespeare, as well as most of the people in his audience, understood that reason has been conquered in Romeo and that his love has become the new ruler of both his mind and body.

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