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A Moral Interpretation of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

Though *Romeo and Juliet* has historically been viewed as a work of romance by both the average reader and academic scholars, there are numerous elements of the play which heighten the possibility that the overarching theme of this iconic love story is not love at all, but moral dilemma. Traditionally, there are three ways of reading the play, as explained by Joseph Pearce (Pearce 20-22). In the first, fate is the antagonist; Romeo and Juliet are powerless and cannot be held responsible for their actions, no matter how unwise or imprudent, as fate is unconquerable. In the second reading, the adversary and driving force is the hatred and bigotry their feuding families possess; those who have this perspective view the lovers as victims of hatred whose only redemption is in their love. The third outlook, the cautionary reading, supposes that each character is responsible for their own reckless and incautious actions, which have extreme consequences.

Due to its polarization and dispassion, this practical aspect has not been sufficiently researched or discussed by academic scholars. It is impossible to know how William Shakespeare intended for his works to be interpreted. However, by analyzing the impassioned language and impulsive actions of the characters, we can draw an inference which supports the moral reading of *Romeo and Juliet* and disproves the fatalistic and romantic readings. In this cautionary and moral analysis, *Romeo and Juliet* becomes less of a romance and more of a cautionary tale in which the lovers' demise is the direct result of their immaturity, idolatrous actions, and lack of guidance in Friar Laurence.

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is based off of Arthur Brooke's 1562 narrative poem *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*, in which Brooke's Juliet is older than Shakespeare's Juliet and Romeus is thought to be younger than the Romeo we are familiar with. We can infer this by Shakespeare referring to Romeo as simply being a "young" man (1.4.174.), whereas Brooke describes him as so young that his "tender chin" has no beard (Brooke 55). In Brooke's poem, Juliet is almost 16 (Brooke 1860). However, she is not yet 14 in Shakespeare's play (1.2.9.). This forces us to ask why Shakespeare deliberately made Romeo older and Juliet younger, when she was already considered too young to be married in the original poem.

The common explanation behind this is that he highlighted her age in order to soften the responsibility of the two young lovers, therefore making them less culpable for their own tragic ending. This reasoning is commonly cited by those in favor of the fatalistic and romantic interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet*. However, it is both more likely and more realistic that Juliet's age is made a focal point in the play as a representation of the ill-timed relationship and to serve as a deterrent to adolescent marriage. Former United States President and Harvard professor John Quincy Adams made a point of the importance of Juliet's age in his 1845 letter to James Henry Hackett, a Shakespearean actor:

The age of Juliet seems to be the key to her character throughout the play, an essential ingredient in the intense sympathy she inspires; and Shakespeare has marked it, not only in her discourse, but even in her name, the diminutive of tender affections applied only to childhood. If Shakespeare had exhibited upon the stage a woman of nineteen, he would have dismissed her nurse and called her Julia. She might still have been a very interesting character, but the whole color and complexion of the play must have been changed. An

intelligent, virtuous woman, in love with a youth of assorted age and congenial character, is always a deep interest in the drama. But that interest is heightened and redoubled when, to the sympathy with the lover, you add all the kind affections with which you share the joys and sorrows of the child. There is childishness in the discourse of Juliet, and the poet has shown us why; because she had scarcely ceased to be a child. (Hackett 222-23)

Adams's analysis of Juliet's age directly aligns with the theory that Shakespeare intentionally made Juliet younger to evoke a specific reaction from audience members. Females in Elizabethan England were considered children until they were between 14 and 15 years old and the ideal age for women to marry was 20, though they were not usually married until much later, around 25 or 26. (Franson 244). Karl J. Franson said of Juliet's age, "That Capulet would offer his daughter to Paris despite her 'extreme youth,' thus forcing Juliet to marry Romeo secretly, must have been appalling to an Elizabethan." (Franson 244) He then cites Shakespeare's unsatisfactory marriage at 18 years old to be the reason he lowered Juliet's age and used it frequently throughout the play as a warning to audiences of the consequences of marrying too young, as he evidently knew them quite well.

*Romeo and Juliet* is the most explicitly religion-oriented of Shakespeare's plays, as it takes place in Italy during a time when Catholicism was the vastly dominant religion. The feuding families are both Catholic and the mentor of the lovers was a Catholic priest. Therefore, it is assumed that faith would play a pivotal part in the daily lives of these characters if they practiced their religion devoutly, as they should. Readers are then forced to ask why faith is so quickly put aside by Romeo, a young man raised in a Catholic family the entirety of his life,

when he metaphorically refers to kissing as a sin then indulges in it while persuading Juliet to do the same:

ROMEO. O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do.

They pray; grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

JULIET. Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.

ROMEO. Then move not, while my prayer's effect I take.

Thus from my lips, by thine, my sin is purged.

Now my sin has been taken from my lips by yours.

JULIET. Then have my lips the sin that they have took.

ROMEO. Sin from thy lips? O trespass sweetly urged!

Give me my sin again. (1.4.214-21)

By referring to kissing as a sin and acting on his desires anyway, Romeo is displaying his willingness to overlook his faith and knowingly indulge in sin. Furthermore, he persuades the innocent and naive Juliet to engage in sin as well, a sign his “love” is not love at all. On the contrary, it is nothing more than infatuation and inadvertent manipulation of a girl too young to recognize it. This kiss, unquestionably Juliet’s first, throws her into confusion, making it impossible for her to distinguish between impulsive passion and true love. Romeo is the first to cast his faith aside, foreshadowing his end. Later, after a prudent and brief scolding of Romeo for engaging in such scandalous behavior as appearing at her home, Juliet breaks the First Commandment by naming Romeo “the god of [her] idolatry” (2.2.154).

Idolatry is defined as “Immoderate attachment to or veneration for any person or thing; admiration savouring of adoration.” (“Idolatry, n.”). By adoring and worshipping Romeo to the extent she does, Juliet is engaging in sin. By acknowledging her sin and not ceasing this

behavior, she continues to sin. Like Romeo, her disregard for the faith and infatuation for romance incites her downfall. The lovers frequently let their passion overcome them throughout the play, letting love act as their religion instead of Catholicism. This mindset drives them to dispose of all restraint and logic, eventually committing suicide to avoid being without one another. Paul Siegel quoted William G. Dodd in his explanation of the paradisaal afterlife of lovers:

According to a tenet of the medieval religion of love that continued to be expressed in the Elizabethan adaptations of the novelle, joining the loved one in death qualifies the lover as one of Cupid's saints and ensures that the two meet in the "Paradise in which dwelt the god of love, and in which were reserved places for his disciples." According to Christianity, suicide, unless repentance occurs between the act and death, ensures damnation. In *Romeo and Juliet*, unlike *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*, it is the lovers' paradise of the religion of love, not the after-life of Christian religion, which is adumbrated at the close of the tragedy. (Siegel 372-73)

In so short a time, Romeo and Juliet have become wholly engulfed in their own passion for one another that they see suicide as their only form of peace. In the eyes of these passionate and impulsive adolescents, suicide being a sin is irrelevant. The two would rather commit a mortal sin and face damnation than be apart, a sign their Catholic faith lacks strength and reverence within their minds and hearts.

Despite the flaws of both Romeo and Juliet, most responsible for their demise is the infamous Friar Laurence, who uses his status as priest and mentor to meddle in their relationship. Shakespeare noticeably goes out of his way to emphasize the reverence and godliness of the

priest through the words of the friar himself and in the way other characters refer to him. These elements prove that his objectives are nothing but good. Though done with the best intentions, his actions contributed greatly to their deaths nonetheless. As Romeo and Juliet's trusted mentor, Friar Laurence has a significant influence on the lovers. They consult him when in need and put their confidence and trust in him wholeheartedly. The vitality of his guidance to Romeo and Juliet becomes evident later on when Juliet is told she will be marrying Paris, though she's already secretly married Romeo. She begs Friar Laurence for a solution, threatening suicide if he cannot help her.

And with this knife I'll help it presently.

God joined my heart and Romeo's, thou our hands.

And ere this hand, by thee to Romeo sealed,

Shall be the label to another deed,

Or my true heart with treacherous revolt

Turn to another, this shall slay them both.

Therefore out of thy long-experienced time,

Give me some present counsel, or, behold (4.1.54-61)

In secretly marrying the two, Friar Laurence inadvertently causes a chain of events which forces Juliet to choose between committing bigamy or suicide, both damnable offenses in the Catholic Church. Jill Kriegel describes him as "honorable and dishonorable, reverent and irreverent, salvific and damning." (Kriegel 132) When the play is viewed romantically, the priest is often seen as the hero. When read realistically, Friar Laurence is just another victim of impulse. He, like Juliet, is naive and romantic enough to believe this love between Romeo and

Juliet is real. The other possibility is that he only proceeds with marrying the two in order to acquire the credit for ending the feud between the Capulets and Montagues, which is selfish and reckless. Mera J. Flaumenhaft argues that it is hope, not pride which drives Friar Laurence to marry Romeo and Juliet:

"Hope" propels the Friar's plan to end the feud by marrying the young lovers. He does not appreciate how generations of hatred might lead to the violent disowning of children who refuse to marry according to their parents' wishes. The plan to reunite the lovers after Juliet's feigned death shows his lack of practical experience. Perhaps his confidence in the Providence of God has stunted his own "providence," that is, "prudence." He knows about medicinal potions, but it does not occur to him that his messenger might be delayed by an attempt to deal with the spread of disease. The Friar also does not anticipate that his beautiful boy will die for love if he thinks that Juliet is dead.

(Flaumenhaft 552)

Whether he married them out of naivety, hope, or pride, Friar Laurence allowed his vices to propel his actions nonetheless, which greatly contributed to the death of two children who put their faith and trust in him. Readers would expect the knowledgeable mentor and priest to be less susceptible to such feelings. However, just as Romeo did, Friar Laurence, the godly man who was meant to act as a wise guide and second father to these children, cast his faith aside and let himself be swept into a mess of romance, pride, and immorality. Therefore, it seems more appropriate to label him nothing more than a weak accessory to an avoidable tragedy.

*Romeo and Juliet*, while undoubtedly one of the most popular love stories ever told, is saturated with moral reproach toward the actions of the lovers and their trusted mentor. This is

illustrated to readers throughout the language and actions of Romeo and Juliet, whose adolescence, idolatry, and lack of sufficient guidance in the controversial and misled Friar Laurence led to their tragic deaths. The three most popular interpretations of the play presume the antagonist of this iconic story to be fate, familial feud, and immorality, respectively. The former two are overwhelmingly popular amongst literary scholars and average readers alike, whereas the moral or cautionary interpretation has been neglected and insufficiently discussed by both, most likely due to its dispassionate and pessimistic nature. Despite the lack of academia on *Romeo and Juliet* as a cautionary tale, a deep analysis of the characters' actions and rhetoric as well as the literary elements used by Shakespeare throughout *Romeo and Juliet* makes it obvious that readers must rethink the idyllic message this work has historically had. These elements make it difficult to perceive the play as either fatalistic or romantic; instead, it becomes a cautionary tale by a man who witnessed firsthand the consequences of adolescent love and marriage.



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