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Fulfilling Their Fate:

Roman Mythological Allusions and Organic Unity in *Romeo and Juliet*

This essay interprets formal elements in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, to clarify and achieve a deeper understanding of the play's organic unity. While the ironic forbidden love between the children of the feuding Montague and Capulet families establishes the primary tension, the "star-cross'd lovers" (Shakespeare, Prologue line 6) ultimately resolve this tension by fulfilling their fated doom. Shakespeare's diction, figures of speech, metaphors, irony, foreshadowing, and most importantly Ovidian, Roman mythological allusions underpin the love/hate tension and support the play's resolution and unified meaning. I analyze the play's formal elements, all of which reinforce Romeo and Juliet's fate. Most notably, I examine certain mythological allusions in the play that illuminate the tragic tone and foreshadow the lovers' demise.

Existing scholarship has not sufficiently addressed the play's Roman allusions. Shakespeare's Ovidian allusions, specifically to the myths of Phaeton, Narcissus and Echo, and Pyramus and Thisbe, focus on tragedies and prophecies that foreshadow Romeo and Juliet's double suicide and strengthen the play's overall foreboding tone. The Phaethon references presage the lovers' demise and reflect the play's plot structure, while Narcissus and Echo's myth encapsulates both prophetic death and linguistic constraints endured by Echo and Juliet. Pyramus and Thisbe's myth closely parallels Romeo and Juliet's plight. Shakespeare's allusions create an

objective correlative explaining character motives and foreshadowing the fateful conclusion. This essay predominately focuses on these allusions, which are under-researched in current scholarship, to contribute to the contemporary critical discourse of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Understanding the play's Roman allusions and their contribution to its organic unity requires a brief look at the play's conflicts and tensions. Shakespeare's diction highlights these conflicts and tensions, which are inherent in poetic language (Bressler 60). The prologue overflows with word choices that establish an ambiguous tone to the play:

Two households, both alike in dignity,
 In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
 From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
 Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.

From forth the fatal loins of these two foes

A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life . . . (Prologue 1-6)

This passage suggests multiple meanings of the word *mutiny* (line 3), ranging from a "quarrel" ("Mutiny," def. 1), such as the one between the two families, to "an open revolt against constituted authority" ("Mutiny," def. 2b), which resembles Romeo and Juliet's rebellion against their parents' wishes. With deliberate literary ambiguity, the prologue not only hints that the Montagues' and Capulets' grudge has initiated a new feud, but also foreshadows Romeo and Juliet's fervor, which revolts against their parents' authority. The word *fatal* (line 5) also has two relevant denotations: "allotted or decreed by a fate or destiny" ("Fatal," def. 1), and "producing or resulting in death" ("Fatal," def. 6a). The etymological root of *fatal* is *fate*, which is defined as "the principle power, or agency, by which . . . all events, or some events in particular, are unalterably predetermined from eternity" ("Fate"). Since the word *fatal* connotes both fate and

death, it implies that Romeo and Juliet's relationship is doomed from the beginning. This ambiguous diction foreshadows the events to come and introduces the play's tone.

While the aforementioned diction employed in the prologue lends to the play's tragic air, Shakespeare strategically uses misled communication that shifts the play's comical tone to tragic. Throughout the play, miscommunication abounds primarily through missed letters and misinterpretations, such as Friar Lawrence's missed letter to Romeo, and Benvolio's misunderstanding of Juliet's staged funeral, which he mistakenly communicates to Romeo. Gregory Heyworth discusses another pivotal scene between Romeo and a Capulet servant that not only encapsulates the comedic aspect but also highlights how "the sound and shape of letters can prove perilously alien to their denotations" (243).

SERVANT. I pray, sir, can you read?

ROMEO. Ay, mine own fortune in my misery.

SERVANT. Perhaps you have learn'd it without book.

But I pray, can you read any thing you see?

ROMEO. Ay, if I know the letters and the language. (Shakespeare 1.2.56-60)

As Heyworth states, "Romeo is stubbornly figurative in his concept of reading, the Servant stubbornly literal" (244). The figurative-versus-literal dichotomy parallels the denotations and connotations, as well as miscommunications, that support the play's chief tension. As the play develops, the comedic aspect takes a tragic turn. Heyworth notes, "the game of language veers, under Shakespeare's guidance, from ludic frivolity to mortal crisis" (246).

Shakespeare's figures of speech moreover strengthen the overall form's interrelatedness. The use of metaphor further develops the love/hate tension. When Juliet learns of Tybalt's death and Romeo's banishment, she describes Romeo as having a "serpent heart, hid with a flow'ring

face . . .” and as a “Dove-feather’d raven! wolvish ravening lamb!” (Shakespeare 3.2.74, 76).

Romeo’s opposing portrayals represent Juliet’s conflicted emotions: grieving both a cousin’s death and the consequences her husband will face. Likewise, the play’s abundant death personifications underscore the ambience of fatality mentioned in the prologue. Shakespeare first personifies death as Juliet’s husband when she tells her Nurse, “I’ll to my wedding-bed, / And death, not Romeo, take my maidenhead!” (3.2.136-37). When Juliet’s father finds her apparently deceased, he tells Paris:

O son, the night before thy wedding-day
 Hath Death lain with thy wife. There she lies,
 Flower as she was, deflowered by him.
 Death is my son-in-law, Death is my heir,
 My daughter he has wedded. I will die,
 And leave him all; life, living, all is Death’s. (4.5.35-40)

These ironic personifications of death foreshadow the only resolution to Romeo and Juliet’s impossible marriage: the lovers’ deaths.

Irony, considered “New Criticism’s master trope because it is essential for the production of paradox and ambiguity” (Bressler 61), additionally bolsters the play’s contradictory nature. Juliet’s metaphorical observance of Romeo, and Capulet’s personifications of death in the passages quoted above are not only contradictory, but also imbued with irony. Juliet does not truly think Romeo has deceived her, and death cannot actually substitute for a living person. Because Shakespeare capitalizes the first letter of the word *Death* four times in these six lines, he not only stresses the irony by personifying Death as a living person, but also alludes to the Grim Reaper, a popular personification of death in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance.

Additionally, these death references intensify the foreshadowing of the lovers' demise, and ironically so, since the characters are yet unaware of the play's multiple casualties. Shakespeare also employs ironic missed communications between the two lovers, which ultimately leads to the play's most ironic moment: Juliet's mock death causing Romeo to kill himself, and thus Juliet to follow suit.

Close attention to Shakespeare's figures of speech reveals another metaphor that likewise foreshadows death as the resolution to *Romeo and Juliet's* love/hate tension. Friar Lawrence describes a poisonous flower, while also foreshadowing the lovers' deaths:

Within the infant rind of this weak flower

Poison hath residence and medicine power;

.....

Two such opposed kings encamp them still

In man as well as herbs, grace and rude will;

And where the worser is predominant,

Full soon the canker death eats up that plant. (Shakespeare 2.2.23-24, 27-30)

This metaphor illustrates the play's ironic love/hate tension and foreshadows the dual purpose the poisonous flower serves: mock death resulting in actual death. The overall tension of the play, that the lovers attempt to unite in the face of fateful and feuding opposition, resolves with their suicides.

Ovidian inspired Roman allusions reinforce this fulfillment of fate. These allusions act as an objective correlative, T. S. Eliot's term for a symbol that induces an emotional response from a reader by using certain situations instead of a direct statement of the emotion (Bressler 56). References to these well-known tragedies complement the play's foreboding, calamitous tone.

Though Shakespeare's direct source for the play was the 1562 poem by Arthur Brooke, *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet* (Kermode 1101), Ovid's *Metamorphoses* also heavily influenced Shakespeare. As Robert Kilburn Root notes in his introduction to *Classical Mythology in Shakespeare*, "It was to Ovid that Shakespeare . . . turned for the classical allusions which the taste of the sixteenth century demanded in its literature" (Root 2). While twenty-five mythological allusions appear in the play, all but five occur in the first two acts (Root 9). This shift reflects the play's shift in tone: from the romantic encounters of the lovers in Acts 1 and 2 to the tragic events in Act 3, when Tybalt kills Mercutio, and Romeo kills Tybalt. When telling Benvolio of his love for Rosalind in Act 1, Romeo mentions Eros, stating, "Alas that love, whose view is muffled still, / Should, without eyes, see pathways to his will!" (Shakespeare 1.1.171-72). In mythology, Eros is the "boy god of love who was identified by the Romans with Cupid or Amor" ("Eros" 126). Eros's association with love reinforces the play's romantic theme. When in the aforementioned allusion Romeo speaks of the blindfolded Eros, he intimates his love for Rosalind and implies that he is blinded by his emotions. Yet, Eros's Roman connotation with Cupid, who shoots his arrow, causing people to fall in love instantly, allows the allusion to foreshadow Romeo and Juliet's instantaneous love-at-first-sight interaction at the Capulet festivity. In the post-Freudian, modern understanding of Eros, Eros's association with Thanatos, the death instinct, also connects love with fatality, again bolstering the play's fateful tone.

While Eros allusions support the romantic theme, most of the play's allusions refer to tragedies and prophecies. Shakespeare's references to Phaeton, which heavily influence the play's plot structure, strongly link to Ovid's interpretation of the Phaeton myth. Phaeton, son of Phoebus, loses control while driving his father's chariot, forcing Zeus to strike him down with a thunderbolt. As Heyworth states,

Ovid's myth opens to spatio-temporal order: Phoebus's attendants, Day, Month, Year, Century and Hours, stand about his throne at equal distances . . . but Phaëthon's unruly transit soon disrupts that necessary distance both spatially and temporally In *Romeo and Juliet*, this hybrid solar motif measures dramatic time calibrated to the eccentric rhythm of romantic and tragic anxiety. (234)

Phaeton's swift descent from his joyous ride into tragedy parallels Romeo and Juliet's quick downward spiral from their nuptials to their suicides. Phaeton and Romeo similarly disregard their fathers' wishes and die trying to fulfill their own desires. While Capulet is extremely outspoken about his daughter's rejection of Paris, Montague only voices concern for his son. Montague tells Benvolio, "Could we but learn from whence his sorrows grow / We would as willingly give cure as know" (Shakespeare 1.1.154-155). Montague's fatherly love mirrors that of Phoebus, who gives Phaeton the chariot's reins even though he knows its danger. Because Ovid's "Phaëton" is a story about fatherhood, the sun, and time, Montague's brief appearances act oppositely as "the imagery of an inverted solar cycle [which] stands out as a signal of the dysfunction inherent in Montague and Romeo's relationship" (Heyworth 239). Early in the morning, Juliet states, "Now is the sun upon the highmost hill / Of this day's journey . . ." (Shakespeare 2.5.9-10). As Jonathon Bate articulates, "from this point on, its motion—and with it that of the play—can only be downward like Phaëthon's" (Bate 177). While speaking of Romeo's anticipated arrival, Juliet pleads, "Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds, / Towards Phoebus' lodging; such a waggoner / As Phaeton would whip you to the west . . ." (Shakespeare 3.2.1-3). Here Shakespeare wraps the allusion in irony. As Bate notes, "The irony is that in willing on the night, she is willing on the tragedy, the moment of separation, Romeo's exile, and ultimately the confusion and mistiming which bring the death of both lovers" (Bate 177). The

repeated Phaeton allusions are central to many of the play's elements: supporting the tragic tone, contributing to the irony, and foreshadowing the play's dramatic temporal shift into sudden tragedy.

Just as Romeo alluded to Echo in discussing his love for Rosalind, as shown above, Juliet alludes to Echo's myth while repeating Romeo's name in love. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Echo is a nymph hopelessly in love with the god Narcissus, and she wastes away after his rejection. She only leaves behind the sound of her voice, which Juliet mimics in repetition. After Romeo and Juliet's first encounter on the balcony, Juliet states, "Else would I tear the cave where Echo lies, / And make her airy tongue more hoarse than [mine] . . ." (Shakespeare 2.2.161-62). Bate points to the linguistic constraints endured by Echo and Juliet. While alluding to Echo, Juliet "alludes to her concomitant linguistic imprisonment at the end of the first balcony scene But in the very act of speaking thus, she overcomes her bondage. Unlike the conventionally silent woman, she speaks aloud; and, as Echo cannot, she initiates a further dialogue with her beloved" (Bate 180). Echo's myth also invokes the myth of Narcissus, who meets a prophetic death like Romeo and Juliet's. In *Metamorphoses*, Nemesis approves a prayer by enemies of Narcissus that "So may *he* love—and never win his love!" (Ovid 3.405). While this prophecy leads to Narcissus falling in love with his reflection and his ultimate demise, it also resonates with Romeo's brief love for Juliet. Heyworth refers to the "Narcissus and Echo" allusion in comparison to *Romeo and Juliet*, stating, "the *Narcissus and Echo* myth acts as a model for a linguistic game of hide-and-seek gone awry: watching that begets hiding that begets calling. Romeo, like Narcissus evading pursuit, is the hider; Juliet, like Echo, is the caller . . ." (Heyworth 246). Echo's inability to speak more than repetitive words reflects the lovers' inability to communicate. As Heyworth notes, these miscommunications "grow out of a quibble over letters and grow into an

increasingly desperate discontinuity between intention and expression, the literal and the figurative, fact and message” (246). As the Phaeton myth bolsters the play’s tragic elements, Echo’s myth strengthens the prophetic ones. Romeo and Juliet must fulfill their doomed destiny to resolve the play’s tension, just as Narcissus and Echo are destined to their own tragic demise.

In Act 2, Mercutio briefly lists a plethora of Roman allusions. Upon greeting Romeo, he states, “Dido [was] a dowdy, Cleopatra a gipsy, Helen and Hero hildings and harlots, Thisby a grey eye or so, but not to the purpose” (Shakespeare 2.4.38-43). Dido, mentioned in the *Metamorphoses* story “The Pilgrimage of Aeneas,” is portrayed as having a “heart too ill-inured / To bear the parting from her Trojan spouse [Aeneas]. / Feigning a holy rite, she built a pyre / And fell upon his sword and, duped herself, / Duped all” (Ovid 14.83-87). Dido’s suicide by her lover’s sword mirrors Juliet’s demise in Shakespeare’s play. *Metamorphoses* briefly mentions Helen, her kidnapping by Paris sparking war in Book XII. While Paris and Romeo share similar fates pursuing their loves, Shakespeare’s allusion to the Ovidian Paris relates to Count Paris, adapted from the source poem by Brooke, who also dies in pursuit of Juliet. Though Mercutio’s allusion to Hero does not appear in Ovid’s mythological narrative, Hero’s story is found in another famous Ovidian work, *Double Heroïdes*. Dido, Helen, and Hero all make appearances in Ovid’s epistolary poems in *Heroïdes*, and its follow-up, *Double Heroïdes*, which takes the form of a collection of letters written by distressed heroines and absentee heroes from Greek and Roman mythology. The allusions to these tragic lovers’ correspondence mirror the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet’s misled communication. The allusion to Thisbe resonates with the entire premise of *Romeo and Juliet*. According to Ovid’s interpretation, Thisbe has a forbidden relationship with her lover Pyramus that ends in joint suicides. Pyramus and Thisbe share with Romeo and Juliet the parental ban of their love, similar meetings in tombs, and suicides caused

by temporal miscommunication.

Because the particular Ovidian allusions employed derive from ancient Rome, they additionally reflect the play's Italian location, Verona. Paulina Kewes notes, "The history and literature of Ancient Rome pervaded the thought and imagination of Elizabethan England Lessons of Roman history were a shaping influence on Elizabethan thinking about issues that were central to the age . . ." (515). For the Elizabethan playgoer, Rome would connote Italy. Deepening this allusion is the consideration of Romeo's name as a derivation of *Rome*, which the Elizabethan audience would have associated with Italy (Tutino 738). As Robert C. Jones states, "Italy offered not only a frequent setting but a constant source of allusion with which poets more interested in the resources of allusion than in those of a regional setting could charge their tragic scenes" (268). The significance of these Roman allusions, acting as an objective correlative, bolsters the play's tone effectively due to the audience's familiarity with Rome and Italy.

In conclusion, *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet's* central feud between the Montague and Capulet houses is overshadowed by the love of their children, Romeo and Juliet. The ironic forbidden love between the children of the feuding families becomes the play's primary tension. Because Romeo and Juliet fulfill the fated doom of the "star-cross'd lovers" (Shakespeare, Prologue 6), the play concludes with their deaths and the dissolution of the Montague and Capulet quarrel. Consequently, the tension between love and hate resolves, giving the poem organic unity. After closer observation of Shakespeare's diction, metaphor, irony, paradox and most significantly Ovidian, Roman allusions, a seemingly paradoxical work of art fuses together. When Prince Escalus gathers the families together after Romeo and Juliet's suicides, Shakespeare uses this moment as a reflection on the play's ultimate paradox:

See what a scourge is laid upon your hate,

That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love,

And I for winking at your discords too

Have lost a brace of kinsmen. All are punish'd. (Shakespeare 5.3.291-95)

The fundamental resolution of the love/hate tension requires the lovers to die. Romeo and Juliet's deaths also terminate the Montague and Capulet feud, and, as Heyworth notes, "the final scene returns us full circle to the feud of the prologue, putting an end at last to 'the continuance of their parent's rage'" (10). This too means an end to the Montague and Capulet lineages; as Heywood states, "Peaceful closure may have replaced the continuance of strife, but it's brought with the sacrifice of a greater flesh-and-blood continuity" (238). The resolution also ultimately fulfills the fate of the "star-cross'd lovers" foreshadowed throughout the poem. Yet, the ill-fated Ovidian Roman allusions stand as the most significant technique in supporting the chief paradox or the primary tension. Shakespeare takes full advantage of the allusions as an objective correlative, evoking emotion from the Elizabethan audience, while also contributing to the overall foreboding, tragic tone. With the tragedies of Echo, Dido, Helen, and Hero, the prophecy of Narcissus, Phaeton's disastrous journey, and the familiar doomed parallels of Pyramus and Thisbe, resolving the love-hate tension of *Romeo and Juliet* requires analysis of the play's allusions to the Ovidian stories of love and death that resonate profoundly throughout literary history and give the play organic unity.

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