Growing Up in a Violent World

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In the following essay, Marjorie Garber recognizes the enduring appeal of the story of star-crossed lovers, with dynamic supporting characters like Mercutio and the Nurse. The turning point is the death of Mercutio, which, along with Tybalt’s death immediately following, changes the play suddenly from comedy to tragedy and affects the entire population of Verona. The design shows Romeo growing from shallowness to maturity and, more impressively, Juliet growing from dependent child to mature woman, as she finds herself increasingly alone, supported only by her love for Romeo. The play is marked from the first by the use of sonnets, telling of civil war and young lovers in a society that pits the very young against the old and powerful, making an integral association of love and death and youth and old age.

Romeo and Juliet, long celebrated as one of the world’s great love stories, is also one of Shakespeare’s liveliest and most appealing plays. Its tragic tale of “star-crossed lovers” is set against a vivid background of civil strife and domestic controversy in the Italian city of Verona, and its cast includes at least two characters—Juliet’s Nurse and Mercutio—who threaten to steal the show. The Nurse, at once bawdy and sentimen-tal, earthy of tongue and soft of heart, has an immediacy about her that cuts across the ages; she is modern and timeless. As for Mercutio, tradition tells us that Shakespeare felt obliged to kill him off in the third act, so that his play would not be usurped—or upstaged—by his own dramatic character. One of Shakespeare’s early editors, the poet and critic Samuel Johnson, wrote that “Mercutio’s wit, gaiety and courage, will always procure him friends that wish him a longer life,” and generations of audiences have borne this out.

Tragedy and Maturation

But Romeo and Juliet has more to offer its viewers than a touching plot and engaging characters. A closer look will show that Shakespeare designed his play in such a way as to guide us skillfully toward a fuller understanding of its complexities, both in structure and in language. To observe this dramatic design, let us begin with the turning point we have already mentioned: the death of Mercutio.

The duel in which Mercutio and Tybalt are slain is central to the play not only in its placement at the beginning of Act III but also in its effect upon the populace of Verona. Mercutio is a pivotal figure for many reasons, including his own remarkable poetic imagination—so unlike that of others in the play—and the fact that he is a kinsman to the Prince, rather than to either the Montagues or the Capulets. It is no exaggeration to say that when he dies the world of Romeo and Juliet turns from comedy to tragedy.

Juliet’s Influence

In Act II, Scene iv, we see Mercutio engage Romeo in a battle of wits, rejoicing that his friend has become “sociable” once more. (The change in attitude, which Mercutio attributes to a return of common sense, has in fact resulted from Romeo’s encounter with Juliet, and is yet another sign of her influence on his growth from self-absorption to self-knowledge.) As the
puns and quips fly, Mercutio pretends to be overcome and finally calls upon a friend to part the combatants: “Come between us, good Benvolio! My wits faint” (66). The mood of the scene is comic, playful, and inconsequential—very like that of the first message scene between the Nurse and Juliet. But a few hours (and only three scenes) later, when the three friends encounter Tybalt, the same scenario results in tragedy. The weapons this time are swords rather than words, and it is Romeo who intervenes, while Mercutio is mortally wounded as a result of his intervention. Romeo’s murmured explanation, “I thought all for the best” (III,i,102), tellingly reinforces the parallel between this duel and the previous one, for the name of Benvolio, the peacemaker in the duel of words, means literally “well-wisher”—one who “[thinks] all for the best.”

We have mentioned a growth and change in Romeo, signified not only by his desire to heal the rift between the warring parties but also by a new vigor and originality in his language, profoundly different from the hackneyed phrases in which he expressed his passion for Rosaline. The most remarkable pattern of maturation in the play, however, is not Romeo’s but Juliet’s; indeed, it would not be excessive to say that she is the central figure in the play, despite the symmetrical balance of Montague with Capulet, or the even-handed justice of the title. And here again the playwright tips his hand—we must think, deliberately—by designing a series of steps by which the audience can clearly see a child become a woman. When we recall that the breakneck pace of Romeo and Juliet makes the entire drama occur within the course of four days, the transformation is even more astounding.

From Child to Woman

Juliet’s growth to maturity is especially vivid for the audience because when first we see her she seems to have so far to go. In the opening scenes of the play she is wholly submissive, even passive, her sheltered life dominated by three authority figures: father, mother, and Nurse. Asked by her mother what she thinks of marriage, she replies “It is an honor that I dream not of (I,ii,66). When she is told that Paris seeks to marry her, her answer is similarly dutiful: “I’ll look to like, if looking liking move (97)—but only, she hastens to add, if her mother gives consent. Given this initial glimpse of what is clearly a daughter rather than a mature woman, it is all the more startling for the audience to see what happens when first she sets eyes upon Romeo.

In the course of the Capulet ball, Juliet has spoken with Romeo and kissed him, but she does not yet know who he is. In order to find out, she devises a cleverly indirect ploy, first inquiring from the Nurse about the identities of two other young men in whom she actually has no interest. Only after she has learned their names, and thus diverted the Nurse’s curiosity, does she ask about Romeo. Here for the first time we see Juliet act less than straightforwardly with one of her mentors, and in doing so begin to establish a separate adult identity. In a similar way, when her parents inform her of the marriage arranged with Paris, she replies with both overt defiance and covert cunning. “I will not marry yet,” she tells her mother, “And when I do, I swear/It shall be Romeo, whom you know I hate,/Rather than Paris” (III,v,122-4).

Juliet’s Isolation

From the time of this first meeting, but more particularly from the time of the tragic duel, Shakespeare shows us a Juliet whose self-knowledge is coupled with an increasing isolation, which separates her from friends and family, and leaves her, after Romeo’s banishment, almost entirely on her own. As she develops from childhood to adulthood she undergoes a painful process of divestiture, stripping herself of former confidants one by one, as each appears to fail her. First she is forced to reject her parents, who insist blindly upon her marrying Paris; then, with even more pain, she must estrange her-
self from the Nurse, who though an essential ally in happier days, now cheerfully urges her to commit bigamy. In effect, Juliet, too, is “banished” by the Prince’s edict. In dramatic terms, her isolation is symbolized by such events as the two soliloquies she speaks from the balcony (II,ii; III,ii), her refusal—on the Friar’s order—to let the Nurse sleep in her chamber on the eve of the wedding, and her poignant observation as she reaches for the sleeping potion: “My dismal scene I needs must act alone” (IV,iii,19). Although she is for a moment tempted to call to her mother and Nurse for comfort she realizes that the possibility of such comfort is lost. Finally, in the play’s last scene, she will reject the Friar’s inadequate though well-meant offer to “dispose” of her “among a sisterhood of holy nuns” (V,iii,156–7), and with it she rejects the Friar himself. This dismal scene, too, she must act alone.

But at the same time that she has lost her family and friends, she has gained a husband and lover—and in her scenes with Romeo, Juliet demonstrates a startling maturity of another kind by rejecting false modesty in favor of a frank declaration of love and an even framer declaration of sexual desire. The play invites us to contrast this behavior not only with her own previous naivete (“I’ll look to like, if looking liking move”) but also with the coy chastity of Romeo’s first love, Rosaline, and with the coarse vulgarity of the Nurse. Thus, in the balcony scene Juliet is at first embarrassed to find that Romeo has overheard her private thoughts, but within half a dozen lines her “maiden blush” has given way to a direct and unashamed question: “Dost thou love me?” (II,ii,86; 90). Notice that it is she who asks the question, as it is she who has first spoken of love. Throughout the scene she remains the dominant figure, alternately advising, cautioning, and summoning Romeo, while he quite appropriately stands gazing at her from below. For a young woman of her age and her sheltered upbringing, this innocent forwardness is as remarkable as it is appealing. . . .

Society’s Impediments

From the first, the audience is made aware that there is something seriously wrong in the play’s world. The Chorus delivers a Prologue in the form of a sonnet, a fourteen-line poem usually devoted in Shakespeare’s time to a private declaration of love. But here we have a sonnet gone public, and a sonnet that speaks not of love but of civil war: “Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean” (4). Moreover, the Prologue is followed by the appearance of two servants of the house of Capulet who seem to have no object in life except to quarrel with their rivals, the servants of Montague. . . . Their squabble inevitably expands to envelop their masters, as Old Capulet, still wearing his nightgown, rushes into the street calling for his sword. There could be no more visible sign of the disorder endemic in Verona than the fact that servants draw masters into battle rather than the other way around.

As always in Shakespeare’s plays, civil war is a symbol of conflict, not only within nations or cities, but also within individuals. As Verona is torn apart by the “ancient grudge” (Prologue, 3) between the Montagues and the Capulets, so will Prince Escalus be torn between strict justice and generous mercy, Juliet torn between loyalty to her family and love for her husband, Romeo torn between a desire to halt the feud and a need to avenge the death of his friend Mercutio. . . .

In fact, it may be useful for us to look at the feud between the Montagues and the Capulets not only as the central political fact of the plot but also as an underlying pattern that determines the nature of theme, image, and language throughout the play. . . .

The presence of Old Capulet and Old Montague in the thick of the battle also reminds us of the tension that develops in this play between youth and age. Prince Escalus, parting the sides, speaks of “ancient citizens” who “wield old partisans, in hands as old,” forsaking the gravity proper to their years (I,90; 92). At the ball we hear from Old Capulet himself that he is.
long past his dancing days, and the conflict of generations is heightened by the evident age of both the Friar and the Nurse. Romeo argues that the Friar cannot understand love since he is no longer young, and the Nurse complains volubly about her aching bones and shortness of breath. "Old folks," says Juliet, are "unwieldly, slow, heavy, and pale as lead" (II,v,16-17). Ironically the old men and women in the play often behave like children—impetuous, willful, and dogmatic—while some of the children possess a wisdom and maturity foreign to their parents. Yet the older generation wield the power in Verona, though the younger men—to their cost—bear the swords.

The two oppositions we have noticed are in some way analogous to one another; we might perhaps say that love is to death as youth is to age.
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