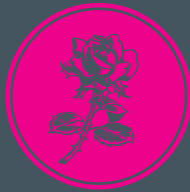


THE
CONNELL GUIDE
TO SHAKESPEARE'S



ROMEO
& JULIET

“Romeo and Juliet is as inspiring to read as it is to watch. This guide illuminates the text without losing any of the passion and is essential reading for all Shakespeare students.”

DAME JUDI DENCH

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE
PLAY IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Simon Palfrey

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Connell Guide
to
Shakespeare's*

Romeo and Juliet

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Introduction: the world's greatest love story?

Romeo and Juliet is routinely called “the world’s greatest love story”, as though it is all about romance. The play features some of the most lyrical passages in all of drama, and the lovers are young, beautiful, and ardent. But when we look at the play, rather than rest in its reputation, the lyricism and the romance are not really what drive things along. It is true that Romeo, especially early on in the play, acts like a young man determined to take his place in an immortal tale of love. Everything he says is romantic – but rather like an anniversary card is romantic. His words propel nothing, or nothing but sarcastic admonitions from his friends to forget about love and to treat women as they should be treated, with careless physical appetite. The world we have entered is rapacious more than romantic.

Everyone knows something of this, from the film versions of the story if nothing else. Romeo and Juliet must fight for their love inside a culture of stupid hatreds. But it is not a simple case of love versus war, or the city against the couple. If it were, it would nicely reinforce clichés about true love, fighting against the odds. I want to suggest that the play Shakespeare actually wrote is more troubling than this. Its lovers oppose the world they are born

into: but the nature of their love is also born profoundly from it.

In the first acts of the play, much of the energy and vitality comes from Romeo’s friend, Mercutio. He is the most vehemently anti-romantic figure imaginable. He takes the city’s over-heated culture of violence, sex and one-upmanship, and accelerates it all into pathological, friend-tiring jokes.

Now we might think it the purpose of Romeo, and the play, to fly beyond Mercutio’s sexual revulsion, his verbal fantasies, and to find something whole and true like love. And certainly this is partly what happens. But it doesn’t happen in the way we might think it should – by Romeo meeting Juliet, and everything else sliding away into irrelevance. For what happens is that Romeo meets Juliet, and everything is transformed by her: but it is also transferred into her. Not only Romeo’s ardour, but the demonic energies of the city and Mercutio, are crystallised and somehow alchemised in Juliet. She turns the lead to gold – bright, hot, the standard of all exchange. But she is also too precious to be safely seen, and fatal to anyone who truly does see her.

Once Romeo properly meets her – in the balcony scene – Juliet takes over the play almost completely (a possession cued by the passing of Mercutio in Act Three, Scene One). Hers is the energy and desire that pushes things to

completion. And this appetite is absolutely a thing of violence. Juliet takes her place as a characteristic Shakespearean hero, one who feels a passion or sees a possibility and drives through to its satisfaction, whatever the cost. Her passion – for all her youth, for all its truth – is at the very cusp of murderousness.

There is one moment in the play which exemplifies this passionate pitilessness. It is when Juliet has agreed to take the sleeping potion. She goes to her nurse, and her mother, and her father, and solemnly swears that she now agrees with their wishes for her, that she will confess her sins (of disobedience) and marry Paris as they have bid her. She gets her parents' thanks and blessing, and leaves to her bedchamber. She does so knowing they will never see her again.

The heart thrills and freezes at the thought. Could there be an act colder in its heat, more open-eyed in its annihilation of everything that until this day has most mattered?

The Prince, at the end of the play, blames the families for the deaths of the young lovers (“See what a scourge is laid upon your hate”). But this strikes me as false, almost as a kind of bad faith. Of course the things that the families do force the lovers' hands. But as much as such plot-devices are at work, they are used to trigger events – Romeo's exile, Juliet's sleeping potion, and so on – rather than define their substance. The truly substantial

thing is whatever moves, or moves in, its heroine. For Juliet represents the devastating coming-true, for better and worse, of everything in this world. She is its scourge, in the sense that she will whip and punish and haunt it; she is also its triumph, in the sense of its best and truest thing. The deaths it all leads to are in no way avoidable, and in no way accidental. They are her inheritance, the thing she was born to. Of course she takes Romeo with her. But it is at heart her play.

THE CHARACTERS

JULIET

CAPULET, *her father*

LADY CAPULET, *Capulet's wife*

TYBALT, *her nephew*

ESCALUS, *prince of Verona*

COUNT PARIS

MERCUTIO

MONTAGUE

LADY MONTAGUE

ROMEO

BENVOLIO, *Montague's nephew*

THE NURSE

FRIAR LAURENCE

PETER, SAMPSON, *serving men of the Capulets*

Gregory, Friar John, an Apothecary, Abraham, Balthasar, a Chorus

A summary of the plot

Act One

A brawl breaks out in Verona's streets. Once again it is the men of the feuding noble families of Capulet and Montague. Prince Escalus intervenes, declaring that further fighting will be punishable by death.

Paris, a kinsman of the Prince, talks to Lord Capulet about marrying Juliet, Capulet's 13-year-old daughter. Her father invites him to a ball. Juliet is unconvinced.

Romeo, son to Montague, missed the brawl. His family and friends wonder where he is. He tells of his unrequited love for Rosaline, and is persuaded to attend the Capulet ball, disguised by a mask, in the hope of meeting Rosaline. Instead he meets and falls in love with Juliet.

Act Two

After the feast, Romeo overhears Juliet on her balcony confessing her love for him. They agree to marry in spite of their families' hatred. With the help of Friar Laurence, they are secretly married the next day. No one else knows except Juliet's Nurse.

Act Three

Tybalt, Juliet's cousin, challenges Romeo to a duel. Romeo refuses to fight. Romeo's friend Mercutio fights instead, and is fatally wounded when Romeo attempts to break up the duel. In

a rage, Romeo kills Tybalt.

The Prince exiles Romeo on pain of death. Romeo secretly spends the night in Juliet's chamber. The next morning the lovers part. Capulet, believing Juliet's grief to be caused by Tybalt's death, insists that she marry Paris immediately. The Nurse recommends bigamy, and Juliet feels betrayed. Now she is on her own.

Act Four

In despair, Juliet consults Friar Laurence. He bids her to pretend to consent to the match with Paris, but on the night before the wedding to drink a potion that will make her comatose for "two and forty hours". His plan is for Romeo to rescue her from the family crypt and carry her to Mantua.

The next morning the Nurse discovers her apparently dead. Her family wail and mourn. She is entombed according to plan. But Friar Laurence's message to Romeo doesn't arrive in time.

Act Five

Romeo is told that Juliet is dead. He buys poison and returns to the Capulet crypt. There he meets Paris, who has also come to mourn Juliet. Romeo kills Paris. Still believing Juliet to be dead, he kisses her and drinks the poison. Juliet awakes and, finding Romeo dead, stabs herself with his dagger. Faced with this sorry sight, the fathers agree to end their violent feud.

What is the play about?

If *Romeo and Juliet* is a play about passion, it is implicitly one of rebellion. This is the key to its extraordinary magnetism. Not a rebellion of people against the state, or not in any simple way. Rather, it is a play about the rebellion of the heart, our basic vitality, a thing equally of spirit and body, against all forms of false, complacent, begrudging, insensible constriction. It is a play that taps into the desire, cherished by all of us, for a life less afraid, less timid and obedient, less, in a very basic way, predicted.

Shakespeare's play knows what an awful thing it is to know everything that must follow from the fact of our birth here, now, among these people and those institutions. How deadening to think that we have, in truth, no choice in what follows at all – that even our thoughts and emotions are likewise already scripted, waiting for us to rehearse and perform them. Thought is free? Not here it isn't – not in Shakespeare's Verona! We even know who we are to hate, and who we can share our hatreds with. Who would not rebel against such a world? Who would not rebel to love's side! *

Romeo and Juliet strikes upon that little flint in us all, what the philosophers sometimes call our 'conatus'. We might call it the soul's appetite – the

*As Marx said, "The tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living."

sense that life is abundant, or should be; that we are born to strive, and that our identity, our being, is a purposive force, searching always for some opportunity or other to strike us into flaming completion; that what might or should or may be really could be. William Hazlitt calls Shakespeare the poet of what would be, of what if – and this is what Juliet and Romeo live. They turn cannot into would. They make the impossible possible.

Romeo and Juliet, then, is a play about the inadequacy of what is habitually given and accepted as our daily lot; about the consequent need, if life and language are to be authentic, for rebellion or internal exile. The Shakespeare critic Kiernan Ryan puts it like this:

Romeo and Juliet lays siege to the legitimacy of a world which deprives men and women of boundless love as surely as it deprives the poor of their share in the worlds' wealth, seeing the lovers as born before their time, citizens of an anticipated age... marooned in a hostile, alien reality, which has already contaminated their hearts and minds, and eventually crushes them completely.

The play is equally about the inevitability of failure, because the institutions of their world, as currently constituted, are immovable. It is about the humiliation of mere survival, and the transformative promise given to us, the witnesses,