Child Soldiers of Verona: The Antiauthoritarian Antiwar Subtext of *Romeo and Juliet*

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Abstract

Common practice has Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* identified as a tragic love story, which has antecedents tracing back as far as *Pyramus and Thisbe* by Ovid. Though valid, this interpretation plumbs only a limited portion of the text. It is the position of this paper that, like Shakespeare's later work *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet* was written with a political subtext in mind. Both texts play on the social memory of the Wars of the Roses, as well as continuing sectarian strife between Protestant and Roman Catholic adherents contemporaneous to the era. However, while *Macbeth* served to prop up the righteousness of the monarchy then in power, *Romeo and Juliet* can be seen as its antithesis with its appeal to the masses - and especially to the young - as it presents questions as to the futility of an internecine hatred which appears to only serve the senior generation. The youthful cadres within the play, swords in bucklers, are trained by their elders to take the merest slight as deadly insult as they patrol "…fair Verona…" in a manner that could sadly be all too familiar within far too many more modern communities and cultures. These experiences refresh the moral inherent within Shakespeare's tale again and again across the generations.

Introduction

The perception of works of a political nature within Shakespeare's canon is, for many, often confined to the obvious with his history plays - *Henry V*, *Richard III*, *Henry VIII*, etc. However, as Elizabeth Frazer notes regarding his work in her 2016 article "Shakespeare's Politics" in *The Review of Politics* that his (Shakespeare's) "Politics, in the sense of the detail of statecraft, strategy, diplomacy, office, gives way to interpersonal emotion." (Frazer, 2016). In the world of the modern performative arts this sort of deeper, emotive detail is clearly recognizable as "subtext". Likewise, in his paper "Shakespeare, the Stage, and the State" Louis Montrose speaks of how "...by representing particular cultural forms and human actions within fictional frames, Shakespeare's theatre invited its audience to reflect upon those forms and actions." (Montrose, 1996). Through the use of known idioms combined with affiliated subtext Elizabethan playwrights such as Shakespeare could offer their audiences insights into and beyond current events.

Analysis

Idioms of duality that the public of the Elizabethan era would be aware of such as Youth and Age, Reason and Passion, War and Peace were polarities that Renaissance writers persistently shared. Reflection upon war and peace was at the heart of the Humanist movement, just as the conduct of war and peace was at the foundation of the European state system during the early modern period. (Marx, 1992) Recognizably idiomatic stories featuring couples whose love is undermined by social conflicts would have been Dido and Aeneas, Pyramus and Thisbe, and Troilus and Cressida. … Thus it is clear that the story structure was well recognizable by virtually any audience who entered the theatres of the era.

Extending from the realm of idioms we have the audience's knowledge of history, which during the 16th century it has been noted was less an academic topic and more one of morality and myth. In his analysis of *Richard II* historian Nigel Saul commented that "... Underlying Shakespeare's preoccupation with civil strife was a deeper concern for social order. In the Elizabethan's world view civil discord imperilled the very existence of society. This was essentially the mediaeval view of the world. Everyone and everything was held to have its allotted place. From the bottom of society to the top, people were linked in a 'great chain of being', which duplicated the order of heaven." (Saul, 2008). This chain, ranging from God the Creator to the angelic throng, thence to humanity, and from there down to the beasts, the plants, and the stones places everything into their proper places, serving proper function and duties.

As Stephen Greenblatt notes in his book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*: "It is precisely because of the English form of absolutist theatricality that Shakespeare's drama, written for a theater subject to state censorship, can be so relentlessly subversive: the form itself, as a primary expression of Renaissance power, helps to contain the radical doubts it continually provokes" (1980). This is to say the texts approved by and receiving the imprimaturs of such worthies as the Master of the Revels would have acceptable, formalised, structural dialog that might be read in a non-challenging manner. However, when performed, the subtexts and idioms could paint a clearly different portrait to the assembled audiences.

With this understanding and spinning off from these foundations then we can take a renewed close look at some of what is said - and unsaid - within the text of the ostensibly "non-political" work *Romeo and Juliet*.

Let us begin with a look at the classic introduction from the Prologue:

CHORUS:

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. …

Arguably, for an Elizabethan audience the historical idiomaticity inherent in this passage could be seen to refer to the Plantagenet line, and its descendant houses of Lancaster and York. This is followed shortly - still within the prologue - with:

GREGORY:

The quarrel is between our masters, and us their men.

reminding the audience that it is the aristocrats who are the cause of the ongoing strife, and those who serve them simply do so at their whims.

Later dialogs, for those amongst the Elizabethan audience, could well have struck the chords of moral memory both regarding the internecine machinations of those in power as well as the proposed philosophical power structures within the "great chain". The thronging mass would know the daily reports of indiscretions from the royal court, as well as recalling the verbal histories of the battles between York and Lancaster. They would sense, as much as know, what was being "unspoken of" to each and all of them.

As we approach the play's conclusion during Romeo's visit to the Apothecary the audience is exposed, in Act 5, Scene 1, to a nihilistic declamation by Romeo, evoking the voice of the rebel:

ROMEO

Art thou so bare and full of wretchedness,

And fearest to die?

Famine is in thy cheeks,

Need and oppression starveth in thy eyes,

Contempt and beggary hangs upon thy back;

The world is not thy friend, nor the world's law,

The Master of the Revels and The Lord Chamberlain might read such words and simply see the sadness of a young lover, seeking to purchase poison to still the pain of his loss. Yet to the groundling in the stalls who face government sanctioned religious discrimination the voice speaks quite a different phrase.

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