

Romeo and Juliet Revisited

By Christopher Eastman-Nagle

The modern 'take' on Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet' has tended to emphasize the thwarting of romantic love by an adult society too full of its own agendas and conflicts to have much room or regard for its passion and beauty. Part of the playwright's consummate skill is that while he does dramatize our sense of the power and rapture of young love, he also shows what happens when willful, naïve, egoistic, high risk taking and eventually desperate young people confront much more powerful social forces. The lovers rapidly find themselves hopelessly out of their depth and forced to gamble against ever multiplying risk contingencies, ever heavier odds and ever higher stakes.

Friar Laurence, the one supposedly responsible mentoring character who through judicious delay and counsel could have assisted these two very young people to exercise some caution and judgment, ends up indulging their instant marital whims for reasons scarcely less unworldly than his protégés. He actually thinks that an unsanctioned elopement with anyone, let alone a representative of a bitter family enemy, might be acceptable to either the Montagues or Capulets and might even bring their bitter feud to an end to boot!

Much more likely, such an illicit match would only serve to enrage everyone, make life extremely difficult for the young people and further inflame inter-clan tensions. By agreeing to marry this couple in secret, he is feeding highly explosive material into an already volatile environment.

Juliet's old nurse, who knows exactly what is going on from the beginning of her mistress's affair, behaves without any regard for her (Juliet's) long term interests or any sense of obligation to her parents and longtime employers. Instead of treating Juliet as if she had taken leave of her senses, remonstrating with her and if necessary, warning her parents (which she was duty bound to do) she indulges folly and betrays the trust that has been placed in her.

Romeo and Juliet were not so much star crossed lovers as children whose ill luck was heavily leveraged by their own inconsequential, self-indulgent, rebellious and deceitful conspiracy, then compounded by inexcusable failures of mentorship and family loyalty by people who should have known better, and capped by the destabilizing dynamic of a powerful and conflicted adult milieu that had no idea what these two young scalawags were up to.

If anyone was crossed it was their parents and family members who were killed, or left to grieve their terrible losses afterward. None of the victims of this romantic imbroglio would have been killed had any of

the conspirators met the reasonable expectations of their employer, ecclesiastical calling, family and social station.

Passion is no excuse for irresponsible behavior, nor is it a defense against the 'bad luck' it creates for itself. Neither is the indulger of such behavior any less accountable for its disastrous outcomes than the main protagonists. If I had been a parent to one of those children, I would have had friar Laurence's hide for codpieces. If I were Capulet, 'dear Nurse' might only fare a little better because her willfulness was almost matched by her stupidity.

The clan feud didn't cause all that mayhem. It was hardly more than a backdrop to it, which makes all that family remorse and repentance at the end of the play seem so much schmaltzy tear jerk. Struggles between powerful families within Italian city states of the period in which the play is set, were an unavoidable consequence of the factional oligarchic governance that blighted all of them at one time or another.

Such struggles couldn't be curbed until much more powerfully centralized authority brought them to heel and absorbed them into its processes. This could not be accomplished merely by threats of force to contain the violence (which is what happens in the play) but through substantial institution building, i.e.; the creation of absolutist monarchies that had emerged as nation states in the fifty to a hundred years prior to 'Romeo and Juliet' being written.

Shakespeare is speaking to Tudor audiences for whom the political disturbance and instability of the late medieval period in England were still fresh in the collective memory. The considerable benefits of concentrating power into the hands of monarch, royal bureaucracy and growing national institutions were as obvious to them as the nearly brand new theater they were standing in.

The late Renaissance emergent Reformation period of Shakespeare's time is a transitional one, whereby the rediscovery of the brilliant achievements and cultural artifacts of the classical period by secular humanist scholars, gradually gives birth to what we now understand as the modern world, and ultimately ideas about the sovereignty of the individual over the traditional claims of family, community and The Old Mother Church.

The playwright picks up on this by making a romantic hero and heroine out of young people behaving willfully (at least by the standards of the day) and then shifting the blame for the terrible outcomes onto their parents, and the unstable world they inhabited.

Yet he is not so modern as to fail to recognize the chaotic and deadly possibilities inherent in asserting individual choice against responsible judgment and the still very powerful collective will.

In the end he comes down on the side of modernity, but only just. Thus he gently maneuvers his contemporary audience towards the beginnings of a modern world view, without jarring it or compromising the entertainment.

Perhaps if Shakespeare had been writing more recently, our Hero and Heroine's increasingly hazardous plans might have been allowed to work, but their grand romance may not have survived a life of exile and the very likely poverty of disinheritance. One suspects that the sequel would have been an ugly tragi-comedy of hand-to-mouth squalor and disillusionment, only to be mercifully ended by a Capulet assassin and Juliet's kidnap back to Verona and a nunnery. Perhaps it is just as well they died romantically at the end of the first and only episode.

The world has come a long way since the late Medieval period in which the play is set. Our children hardly have to contend with traditional family and institutional expectations anymore. They have been so weakened they are not capable of exerting much authority. It is the world of adolescence that has now become powerfully institutionalized. Our little Romeos and Juliets rule and the adults suck!

Of course they do not really rule, nor do the anonymous adults that manipulate them and entrench adolescent values suck. Behind the scenes the children are contained, channeled, indulged and exploited in ways that are every bit as damaging to them as the earlier work of fascist and communist youth movements, and the fictional characters who helped to undo poor wretched Romeo and Juliet, all those centuries ago.

In the play, the wayward youth managers, the priest and the nurse, cause an inter-clan massacre.

The Waffen SS veterans who in 1944 so successfully trained the boy soldiers who made up the 12th 'Hitler Youth' Panzer Division, doomed most them to be wiped out in the vicious battles following the Normandy invasion.

The thousands of young Red Guards who during Mao Tse-tung's Cultural Revolution of the mid to late 1960s, were encouraged to drag their parents, other adult relatives, teachers and local Party Officials before Peoples' Courts, beat them up and accused them of counter-revolutionary crimes, were themselves grotesquely scarred by these terrible events. Many suffered long and very adult periods of 're-education' when the political tide went against them after Mao died.

And today's little 'Consumerbabelets', who have been stripped of all mentorship except for messages from the sponsors, are condemned to a life without moral boundaries, or emotional security, or the capacity to discipline themselves and ultimately their own children, when that time comes.

The only difference today is that the most recent damage sites tend to (but not always) hemorrhage psychological software instead of blood. This can still chronically disable or wipe the victims out in scenes every bit as distressing in their own way as the finale in Shakespeare's play, or the battlefields of Normandy or the disrupted family life, schools and universities of China.

Any society that cannot or will not appropriately protect, guide, discipline and nurture its children into secure, responsible, thoughtful and unselfish individuals, not only betrays them, but its own future. And that applies today every bit as any other time in history.

Some things just never change.

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