William Shakespeare's

ROMEO AND JULIET

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WILLIAM HAZLITT ON THE REALISM OF *ROMEO AND JULIET*

[William Hazlitt (1778–1830), one of the greatest critics of the nineteenth century, wrote such works as *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818), *Lectures on the English Comic Writers* (1819), and a poignant book on his love for a prostitute, *Liber Amoris* (1823). In this extract from his study of Shakespeare's characters, Hazlitt refutes those who maintain that *Romeo and Juliet* is unrealistic in its portrayal of the love between two young people.]

Romeo and Juliet is the only tragedy which Shakespear has written entirely on a love-story. It is supposed to have been his first play, and it deserves to stand in that proud rank. There is the buoyant spirit of youth in every line, in the rapturous intoxication of hope, and in the bitterness of despair. It has been said of *Romeo and Juliet* by a great critic, that 'whatever is most intoxicating in the odour of a southern spring, languishing in the song of the nightingale, or voluptuous in the first opening

of the rose, is to be found in this poem.' The description is true; and yet it does not answer to our idea of the play. For if it has the sweetness of the rose, it has its freshness too; if it has the languor of the nightingale's song, it has also its giddy transport; if it has the softness of a southern spring, it is as glowing and as bright. There is nothing of a sickly and sentimental cast. Romeo and Juliet are in love, but they are not love-sick. Every thing speaks the very soul of pleasure, the high and healthy pulse of the passions: the heart beats, the blood circulates and mantles throughout. Their courtship is not an insipid interchange of sentiments lip-deep, learnt at second-hand from poems and plays,—made up of beauties of the most shadowy kind, of 'fancies wan that hang the pensive head,' of evanescent smiles, and sighs that breathe not, of delicacy that shrinks from the touch, and feebleness that scarce supports itself, an elaborate vacuity of thought, and an artificial dearth of sense, spirit, truth, and nature! It is the reverse of all this. It is Shakespear all over, and Shakespear when he was young.

We have heard it objected to *Romeo and Juliet*, that it is founded on an idle passion between a boy and a girl, who have scarcely seen and can have but little sympathy or rational esteem for one another, who have had no experience of the good or ills of life, and whose raptures or despair must be therefore equally groundless and fantastical. Whoever objects to the youth of the parties in this play as 'too unripe and crude' to pluck the sweets of love, and wishes to see a first-love carried on into a good old age, and the passions taken at the rebound, when their force is spent, may find all this done in the *Stranger* and in other German plays, where they do things by contraries, and transpose nature to inspire sentiment and create philosophy. Shakespear proceeded in a more straightforward, and, we think, effectual way. He did not endeavour to extract beauty from wrinkles, or the wild throb of passion from the last expiring sigh of indifference. He did not 'gather grapes of thorns nor figs of thistles.' It was not his way. But he has given a picture of human life, such as it is in the order of nature. He has founded the passion of the two lovers not on the pleasures they had experienced, but on all the pleasures they had *not* experienced. All that was to come of life was theirs. At that untried source of promised happiness they

slaked their thirst, and the first eager draught made them drunk with love and joy. They were in full possession of their senses and their affections. Their hopes were of air, their desires of fire. Youth is the season of love, because the heart is then first melted in tenderness from the touch of novelty, and kindled to rapture, for it knows no end of its enjoyments or its wishes. Desire has no limit but itself. Passion, the love and expectation of pleasure, is infinite, extravagant, inexhaustible, till experience comes to check and kill it. Juliet exclaims on her first interview with Romeo—

> My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
> My love as deep.

And why should it not? What was to hinder the thrilling tide of pleasure, which had just gushed from her heart, from flowing on without stint or measure, but experience which she was yet without? What was to abate the transport of the first sweet sense of pleasure, which her heart and her senses had just tasted, but indifference which she was yet a stranger to? What was there to check the ardour of hope, of faith, of constancy, just rising in her breast, but disappointment which she had not yet felt! As are the desires and the hopes of youthful passion, such is the keenness of its disappointments, and their baleful effect. Such is the transition in this play from the highest bliss to the lowest despair, from the nuptial couch to an untimely grave. The only evil that even in apprehension befalls the two lovers is the loss of the greatest possible felicity; yet this loss is fatal to both, for they had rather part with life than bear the thought of surviving all that had made life dear to them. In all this, Shakespear has but followed nature, which existed in his time, as well as now. The modern philosophy, which reduces the whole theory of the mind to habitual impressions, and leaves the natural impulses of passion and imagination out of the account, had not then been discovered; or if it had, would have been little calculated for the uses of poetry.

—William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespear's Plays* (1817), *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. A. R. Waller and Arnold Glover (London: J. M. Dent, 1902), Vol. 1, pp. 248–50

Frederick S. Boas on Political Elements in *Romeo and Juliet*

[Frederick S. Boas (1862–1957) wrote extensively on the history of drama. His publications include *An Introduction to Tudor Drama* (1933) and *An Introduction to Stuart Drama* (1946). In this extract from his book on Shakespeare, Boas examines the political rivalry between the Montagues and the Capulets and its tragic consequences for Romeo and Juliet.]

It has been seen that in several of Shakspere's plays there is an enveloping political plot. The peculiarity of *Romeo and Juliet* is that the political plot does not merely form the background to the main action, but is one of its integral elements. The rivalry of the Montagues and the Capulets gives a tragic bias to what would otherwise be a story of youthful love, and it is therefore rightly made the subject of the opening scene. The biting of thumbs by the serving-men, pugnacious within the safe limits of the law, prepares the way for the entrance of Tybalt, the champion of the Capulet claims, the professional duellist with the lore of the fencing school at his finger-tips, who 'fights as you sing prick-song, keeps time, distance, and proportion: rests me his minim rest, one, two, and the third in your bosom.' To such a swashbuckler even the mild Benvolio's presence is a call to arms, and the result is speedily a general fray swollen by partisans of either house, and by citizens who hate both equally, till the entrance of the Prince stops the tumult on pain of death. Thus the rival families are marshalled face to face at the very outset of the action, and the chief of the state, though he is seen for only the briefest interval, launches the edict which is to have fateful consequences hereafter.

From the ranks of the Montague swordsmen there has been one remarkable absentee. The aged head of the house has flourished his blade in defence of the family honour, but Romeo, the son and heir, is nowhere to be seen. His mother's anxious inquiry elicits the news that he has been espied before dawn, stealing alone towards a grove of sycamore, and we further learn that such is his wont, and that at the first streak of light he creeps home to his chamber where he pens himself in artificial night. We are thus warned, before Romeo appears in person, that he is apart from his kinsmen in nature and sympathies. There is a sentimental strain in his character, and at the outset he and Proteus, though they develop so differently, have a certain likeness. His entrance gives the key to his strange humour. He is in love with the lady Rosaline, but his suit is in vain. Hence his passion for solitude, his sighs, and his tears. But neither the love nor the misery, we are persuaded, can be very deep that finds its vent in unmeaning fantastic antithesis, the *reductio ad absurdum* of 'the numbers that Petrarch flowed in.' A heart that is really breaking does not explode in verbal fireworks about 'anything of nothing first created.' This calf-love of Romeo is adopted by Shakspere from Brooke, and it is probably a mistake to invest it with too great significance. That there enters into Romeo's character a vein of weakness, of volatile emotion, cannot be denied, but it is important to notice that whenever Shakspere gives it prominence he is following closely in the wake of Brooke, and that in the scenes due to his own invention the more sterling and genuinely impassioned side of his hero's nature is developed. The retention of the Rosaline episode is very possibly due to the fact that it prepares the way for one of those instances of the irony of fortune which stud the drama. Benvolio bids Romeo attend the feast of the Capulets that he may forget his mistress in the light of other eyes, and Romeo, though he assents, does so with protestations of unswerving fidelity to Rosaline. But even while he is on the way to the palace of the rival house, he is haunted by presentiments that his fate is not in his own hands:

> My mind misgives
> Some consequence, yet hanging in the stars,
> Shall bitterly begin his fearful date
> With this night's revels.

And so it proves: Romeo has but to change eyes with Juliet, and his love in idleness for Rosaline is annihilated, only to give place to a far more absorbing passion. Benvolio's well-meant

panacea becomes the root of a direr malady than it was devised to cure.

—Frederick S. Boas, *Shakspere and His Predecessors* (New York: Scribner's, 1896), pp. 201–3

GERRY BRENNER ON FRIAR LAWRENCE

[Gerry Brenner (b. 1937), a professor of English at the University of Montana, has written several books on Ernest Hemingway, including *Concealments on Hemingway's Works* (1983) and The Old Man and the Sea: *Story of a Common Man* (1991). In this extract, Brenner finds that Friar Lawrence is striving for political eminence under the guise of helping the young lovers.]

The most telling proof of Friar Lawrence's political motivation is that he continually oversteps his ecclesiastical functions. By marrying Romeo and Juliet secretly and without parental consent, he knowingly violates strict canon law. He does so not to sanctify an act of Providence that has had Romeo and Juliet fall in love at first sight, but, as his express reason to Romeo indicates, "To turn your households' rancor to pure love." Acting on his own volition and interfering in temporal matters, the friar dramatizes the kind of behavior that so perplexes Capulet's illiterate servant. Trying to determine who is on his master's guest list, he remarks, "It is written that the shoemaker should meddle with his yard and the tailor with his last, the fisher with his pencil and the painter with his nets" (I.ii.39–41). To be sure, the friar is not alone in performing forbidden actions. Tybalt seems to thrive on proscribed behavior. Juliet quickly learns to defy parental dictates. And Romeo is a compulsive gate-

crasher, trespassing and committing taboo acts throughout the play. The correlation between the behaviors of the friar and of other characters indicates that excepting Paris, defiance of conventional expectation is wholesale. The correlation also underscores the friar's refusal to abide by God's will. He prefers the autonomy of "My will be done." Taking an active role in the affairs of men, he shows his discontent with leaving matters in the hands of Providence. He even appropriates to himself the task of sending Romeo that crucial letter via a fellow friar, rather than let Romeo's servant, Balthasar, be his emissary, as he had promised Romeo he would (III.iii.169–71).

The friar's herbological interests align him with the play's other drugmaker, the apothecary who commits the outlawed act of selling poison to Romeo. But those interests are more tellingly the means by which Shakespeare has the friar flagrantly expose his urge for political preeminence. The clergy were, of course, usually conversant with simple natural medicine. And the friar's interest in alchemy surely has its beneficial aspect. But his chemical expertise shows that like many a scientific meddler, he tampers with God's natural order and uses nature's secret powers to serve his own purposes. More specifically, on the pretext of restoring the lovers to each other, he tells a distraught Juliet that the ultimate consequence of her drinking his potion will be that Romeo will "bear thee hence to Mantua" (IV.i.117). But why is his alchemy necessary? Why not simply help Juliet flee Verona if he is genuinely interested in reuniting the lovers? His elaborate ruse requires that Juliet deceive her family, that they suffer unnecessary grief, and that he dissemble before them. More, his ruse tells us that he is less concerned with the lovers' happiness than with his ambition. That is, though the play never explicitly considers the question, it implicitly asks us to inquire: What would have happened had his ruse been successful?

Is my question beyond the scope of the play? I think not. After all, the recurrent motif of haste in the play sweeps the plot ever into the future. Capulet eagerly looks forward to Juliet's marriage, as does Paris. Prince Escalus eagerly looks forward to the day when the feud will be over. Romeo and Juliet eagerly look forward to being reunited. And Friar Lawrence eagerly looks forward, I believe, to a brilliant scenario. Had his ruse worked, he could have called for an audience with the prince—the Montagues and Capulets in attendance, naturally. Then he could have informed the Capulets that their daughter was not dead, as they thought, but was alive and happy. He could have explained that his sleeping potion—"(so tutored by my art)" (V.iii.243)—had made her appear dead. And he could have expected that Capulet would rejoice, just as he had after the friar had presumably taught Juliet to defer to his will and so to marry Paris: "My heart is wondrous light, / Since this same wayward girl is so reclaim'd" (IV.ii.46–47). The friar could then have informed all present of the end that his resurrection scheme served: to end the feud and so restore civil harmony by marrying Romeo and Juliet. However humbly he might have divulged his gospel, its effect would be the same. He would receive civil adulation, such praise as Capulet had earlier accorded him: "Now, afore God, this reverend holy friar, / All our whole city is much bound to him" (IV.ii.31–32). And such praise would vault the friar over the prince as Verona's miracle worker, its true leader.

—Gerry Brenner, "Shakespeare's Politically Ambitious Friar," *Shakespeare Studies* 13 (1980): 53–54

Douglas Waters on Catharsis in *Romeo and Juliet*

[D. Douglas Waters (b. 1929) is a professor of English at the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire and author of *Duessa as Theological Satire* (1970) and *Christian Settings in Shakespeare's Tragedies* (1994), from which the following extract is taken. Here, Waters argues that the catharsis or purgation that defines classic tragedy is, in *Romeo and Juliet*, experienced by the audience rather than by the characters in the play.]

⟨. . .⟩ how and in what sense does catharsis as clarification of human experience work in *Romeo and Juliet*? Instead of demanding that the tragic figures learn moral values from mistakes in making moral choices (as the old purgation theory of catharsis has often demanded) catharsis as clarification simply suggests that we as the audience learn from the experience of the whole *mimesis* or dramatic representation without the insistence that the characters in the plot learn as much as we do. The common element in tragedies is not the cognitive experience of the tragic characters but the audience's cognitive experience based on pity and fear for the tragic hero and/or heroine. So trying to determine whether or not Romeo and Juliet ever know for sure what hit them or whether or not they learn much about their wrong choices is trying to look through the wrong end of the telescope. If I am right here and if my interpretation of fate in the play is right, then perhaps we can understand the tragic power of our catharsis as intellectual, moral, and emotional clarification in *Romeo and Juliet*. It is our painful awareness that the lovers are destroyed by fate as a mysterious cosmic force working through the external circumstances of the feud. As we follow Shakespeare's tragic *mimesis*, his presentation of the whole chain of events the way that he imaginatively views the world while in the creation of the play itself, we become engaged in a pleasing process that is pleasing because it is also a learning process. Learning through the incidences of the plot and becoming involved in them intellectually, morally, and emotionally are all part of our overall response, our catharsis as clarification or enlightenment based on our pity and fear for the tragic characters, their experiences, and their reactions. Our intellectual clarification is our understanding that fate is so against the lovers that—do what they would or what the priest and the nurse would—nothing but their death could destroy their parents' feud (strife). Our moral clarification or enlightenment or cognition is our feeling or intuition that, by the time we reach the last scene, the lovers are not thwarted by any dishonesty or ill intention on their part, though they are not perfect but are inexperienced human beings who are innocent of any incorrect moral choice. In this context it would be perverse to say Shakespeare failed to produce what he did not try to produce. The lovers are not

destroyed by lust (desire, whether innocent or otherwise) nor by love (idealistic or otherwise). So part of our catharsis as moral clarification is our recognition that, far from their doing anything that would deserve complete failure to live together, all they really hope for is to be together; our catharsis as moral clarification is the intuitive insight that the lovers themselves did nothing that led fate to drive iron wedges between them. Our catharsis as emotional clarification is experienced throughout the tragic *mimesis* in the situations that arouse our pity and fear for the lovers. Only a few examples are needed here. We pity the lovers when Romeo is banished, when Juliet drinks the sleeping potion, and when Romeo gets the false message about her death, buys poison, goes to her grave, and drinks it *before* the priest arrives and *before* Juliet awakes; they deserve none of these quirks of fate. Our fear for them is aroused and intensified in that, given the full unfolding evidence in the whole mimetic process, they are people like ourselves neither completely evil nor completely good and if fate does destroy someone like them then it could, at least imaginatively and conceivably, destroy us. This is the frightful and mysterious part of the whole tragedy. We need not in our own outlook be fatalistic to appreciate tragedies of fate; but, it seems, we must be imaginatively willing to look at the world in this way as we are responding to this type of play. As I have suggested, then, the play is a tragedy of fate and a very successful one at that. Only if we demand *a priori* that tragedy be of only one kind—tragedy of character—can we pretend that the workings of fate, fortune, and accident disqualify *Romeo and Juliet* as a tragedy.

—D. Douglas Waters, *Christian Settings in Shakespeare's Tragedies* (London: Associated University Presses, 1994), pp. 138–40