

The Not-So-Holy Shrine of Catholicism in *Romeo and Juliet*

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“The Not-So-Holy Shrine of Catholicism in Romeo and Juliet” questions a view of Shakespeare’s relationship to the Reformation in the early tragedy, which claims that his main Reformed concern in the play is to endorse individualistic notions of desire and repentance. Instead, the play is shown to display Reformational sensibilities in its exposure of blasphemous imagery and societal corruption as the vehicle for the lovers’ downfall. This reading takes a critical eye to a culturally idealized romance, allowing modern readers to consider more carefully how passion and temptation were viewed in a post-Reformational context.

See and view the whole Chapter with diligence, for it is worthy to be well considered, specially that is written of the deceauing of the simple and vnwise common people by Idols and Images, and repeated twice or thrise lest it should be forgotten. And in the Chapter following be these words: The painting of the picture and carued Image with diuers colours, entiseth the ignorant so, that he honoureth and loueth the picture of a dead image that hath no soule (Apocrypha. Wisdom 15.4-5). Neuerthelesse, they that loue such euill things, they that trust in them, they that make them, they that fauour them, and they that honour them, are all worthy of death, and so forth.

—Sir Thomas Cranmer, “The Homily Against Peril of Idolatry”

WAS SHAKESPEARE A CATHOLIC OR A PROTESTANT, and what does that mean for our reading of *Romeo and Juliet*? The question remains unresolved. One of the leading scholars on Shakespeare and Catholicism, David Beauregard, sees “positive evidence of Catholic theology” throughout the plays (13), but he spends most of his time looking at the later plays and never adequately addresses the early tragedies. Other scholars seem equally reluctant to ask the question of *Romeo and Juliet*.¹

1. Several authors examining Shakespeare and Christianity more broadly, such as Virgil Whitaker and Barbara Parker, mention it but do not fully address it. In his chapter section on *Romeo and Juliet*, Whitaker alludes to Edmund Spenser’s interest in the “warfare between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism” (117), but never addresses the similar warfare in the Shakespeare text. Parker similarly discusses the friars in detail, implicitly associating Catholicism with idolatry and unreasonable love, but never looks at the effects of Catholicism on the play as a whole (151-153). The author whose approach most closely resembles my own is Beauregard. He addresses the issue in depth in his work *Catholic Theology in Shakespeare’s Plays*, drawing on Cranmer’s homilies to look at Shakespeare’s relationship to the Reformation as I do. As mentioned above, however, he focuses primarily on later plays

David Balty is one of the few scholars who tries to fill this gap. In his dissertation, *The Theological Bard: Shakespeare and the Evolving English Reformation*, he argues that a Protestant emphasis on individualism is the driving force behind the play: the lovers are victims of a societally-focused, Catholic schema which de-emphasizes individual repentance and instead endorses social obligation. *Romeo and Juliet* are the only ones who recognize that society is corrupt and their proper response is to follow individual desire. In the end, golden statues are raised in their honor to show how they have transcended death.

While Balty stands in a long tradition of scholars who see the lovers as the innocent victims of tragic circumstances,² it is strange that he of all of them could and never deals with the question in light of *Romeo and Juliet*. As I will argue, I do not see his “positive evidence of Catholic theology” in this particular play, but claims about Shakespeare’s later religious leanings are beyond the scope of this paper.

2. Most scholars are loath to cast blame on *Romeo and Juliet*. Clifford Leech states that they “are doomed only by the words of the Prologue, not by anything inherent in their situation” (19), and even goes on to say that a moral tragedy is “a contradiction in terms” (20). He does cast some blame in the play, ascribing the moral lesson to Montague and Capulet rather than their children, but he mainly argues this to point out the shortcomings of a play he considers not “fully achieved” (20). For him, “tragedy is necessarily at odds with the moral: it is concerned with a permanent anguishing situation, not with one that can either be put right or be instrumental in teaching the survivors to do better” (20). Other scholars make less assaultive claims, but they stand with Leech on at least one point: the famous lovers are victims, not actors, in their doom. Laurie Maguire blames the characters’ patronyms for the unhappy ending, calling the play a “tragedy of language, alert to the aporetic ambiguities and material power of words” (56). Catherine Belsey, taking a similar approach, says that “The name of Montague, imposed, ancestral, is Juliet’s enemy...If *Romeo*’s non-identity with his name legitimates their love, the repudiated name

come to this conclusion, making one wonder whether the question of Shakespeare's religious leanings has really been answered. The only Protestant lens Balty uses to view the play is that of individualism, a correlate of Reformation theology but one that ignores many aspects of the changing religious climate. He never addresses the Catholic imagery lacing almost every act of *Romeo and Juliet*; most notably, he never mentions that the dialogue of the lovers (supposedly the ones endorsing Reformation ideologies) teems with saints and angels. Additionally, he ignores theologically-minded scholarship that comes to radically different conclusions from his own. Roy Battenhouse, for instance, argues that *Romeo and Juliet* exemplify traditional Christian visions of sin.³ With all of these factors working against him, it seems necessary to view *Romeo and Juliet's* relationship to the Reformation from a slightly different perspective. Shakespeare does indeed use the tragedy to cast Catholicism in a negative light, but to reduce his main priority in doing so to an endorsement of individualism does not account for the tenor of his times. He instead uses evocative Catholic imagery to condemn the lovers along with the rest of Verona.

The Lovers and Verona

Balty pits *Romeo and Juliet* against the social structures that surround them, commenting on the lovers' "socially problematic desire" (129) but claiming that Shakespeare endorses the desire because of his Reformed views on individualism. Balty sees a parallel to this social problem in the feud, which he describes as "a relation of desire between Montague and Capulet" (130), a

returns, nevertheless, to ensure their tragedy" (134). For both scholars, the lovers' inability to escape constricting patronyms is the major crisis of the play. Similarly, Jonathon Goldberg cites Brian Gibbons as saying that "The lovers are from the outset withdrawn in an experience of sublime purity and intense suffering which renders them spiritually remote from other characters and the concerns of the ordinary world" (82). Clearly Gibbons does not think *Romeo and Juliet* are at fault, either, since "sublime purity" is about as far from culpability as one can get.

3. Battenhouse, Roy W. "The Imagery's Import in *Romeo and Juliet*." *Shakespearean Tragedy*, Indiana UP, 1969. Battenhouse describes it this way: "Romeo's regard for Juliet as his 'whole life' is at the root of the tragedy, because of the idolatry and self-deception involved in such an attitude" (103). Virgil Whitaker falls in the same camp, admitting that the "star-crossed" element of the plot weakens the tragedy but also pointing out that Romeo is "presented as morally responsible for what happens to him" (110). Taking a slightly different tack, Barbara L. Parker comes at the question from the perspective of rational understanding, contextualizing the lovers' anti-rational search for hiddenness in a tradition of philosophy and theology including Plato, St. Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas.

competition for virility which seems to hinge on lust for the other house's women. Romeo, however, estranges himself from this social situation. Balty says that "by refusing to align himself in cross-familial rancor—the tribe mentality—he is alienated not only from the feud itself...but also from the view of love that underlies it" (131). Juliet is also cut off from society. She is "isolated and confined emotionally as well as physically by her status as a daughter" (132). Balty uses the isolation of both lovers to claim that Shakespeare is advocating Reformational individualism, but his reading doesn't seem to grasp the whole picture. There are parallels between the lovers' relationship and their parents' relationship, but these parallels should bring us to a more straightforward—albeit more unsettling—conclusion than Balty's.

The catch is that the lovers' isolation does not necessarily indicate that they are separate from the moral crisis of Verona. Battenhouse agrees with Balty that Verona is a place the Reformers would condemn; he calls it a "city of backsliding Christians" (117), and clearly, if a feud is so entrenched in society that no one remembers how it started, there is something morally amiss. Yet Battenhouse does not draw so clear a line as Balty does between society and lovers. For him, there are many links between decaying Verona and the forbidden relationship, and these links implicate the children as much as the parents. Mercutio is one of these links. Battenhouse describes him as "a kind of internal chorus, by whom Romeo's love is being assessed with a two-sided realism" (113). The first, an "ethical realism," stems from Mercutio's long, fanciful speech on the fairy Queen Mab: described by Shakespeare as a "hag" (1.4.90), she is in Battenhouse's words a "midwife of earthly dreams," who exposes the courtly landscape of Verona for what it is (114). The second realism is Mercutio's perceptive, albeit crude, diagnosis of Romeo's love. "If thou art dun, we'll draw thee from the mire/Or—save your reverence—love wherein thou stickest/Up to the ears," he says unromantically, following up a series of double entendres about Romeo's lovesickness. For all the beauty Romeo sees in it, Mercutio rightly labels his actions as merely "a sexual game" (Battenhouse 114).

The connections intensify when we consider the connections between love and war throughout the play. Samson and Gregory emphasize the sexual nature of dueling at the beginning of the first act, clearly relating love to war:

SAMSON I will show myself a tyrant: when I have fought
with the men, I will be civil with the maids—I
will cut off their heads.

GREGORY The heads of the maids?

SAMSON Ay, the heads of the maids—or their maiden-heads; take it in what sense thou wilt. (1.1.19-24)

Barbara Parker notes how this continues with bawdy puns throughout the play (153). She states that “the war plot thematically parallels the love plot, its fatalities similarly rooted in a reliance on externals that attests a like spiritual blight” (153), demonstrating that the lovers are not immune to the spiritual problems that surround them. Balty’s own parallel between the desires of Montague and Capulet’s households and those of the lovers does similar work, as does Romeo’s explicit participation in Verona’s violence. As Whitaker points out, Romeo willingly takes up the duel against Tybalt, even while characterizing himself as a sinner (116). He and Juliet may be isolated from affectionate or healthy familial relationships, but they are hardly isolated from active participation in the sins of their fathers. Shakespeare’s pervasive comparisons of the feud and lover relationships do more work showcasing a system of shared sins than separating the lovers from their society.

W. H. Auden sums it up by saying the play is “not simply a tragedy of two individuals, but the tragedy of a city. Everybody in the city is in one way or another involved in and responsible for what happens” (366). Romeo and Juliet are embedded in the problems of their society, both because their love reeks of war and sensuality and because Romeo wilfully perpetuates the feud.

The Lovers and Catholicism

One of the most peculiar things about Balty’s treatment of Protestant theology in *Romeo and Juliet* is his conspicuous lack of interaction with the setting. Verona is inarguably Catholic. While the religion of the characters could be simply a result of the historical setting and the source text *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet* by Arthur Brooke, it seems hard to ignore the strongly Catholic language and imagery that Shakespeare incorporates into pivotal moments in the play.⁴ For a world rocked by the Reformation, this kind of language must have conjured

4. What may seem a lack of interaction with the setting on my own part comes in relation to the two friars in the play, who are largely responsible for much of the dramatic action and exemplify the Catholicism of the city. While I have chosen to focus more on the lovers to demonstrate their willing complicity in Verona’s sin, the friars are worth noting in that they provide further examples of that sin and its connection to Catholicism. As mentioned in Footnote 1, Barbara Parker gives an extended discussion of their problematic nature in regards to Christianity. Parker claims that Friar Laurence “presides” over the lovers’ “religion of the eye” (150), going on to describe the many ways the friar abets Romeo and Juliet’s idolatry. Parker only once makes the connection to Reformation theology (150), and though she does not go so far as to say that Shakespeare is condemning idolatries that specifically belong to Catholicism, it is not an illogical jump to make.

myriad connotations of recent bloodshed, political instability, changing theology, and shifting values. Shakespeare and his audience would both have been well aware of this. These connotations, which are not nearly as strong for modern readers, may well be the reason many scholars fail to recognize culpability in the lovers.

Shakespeare wrote for audiences in many levels of society,⁵ but all would have been Protestant in name. English citizens were required to go to Protestant churches on Sundays and holy days and most heard a standard set of strongly Protestant homilies by Thomas Cranmer on a repeating cycle (Shaheen 41). Naseeb Shaheen points out that “along with the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, the homilies were among the best-known writings in Shakespeare’s day” (44). Even Arthur Brooke’s text begins with an admonition against “superstitious friars (the naturally fit instruments of unchastity)” and “auricular confession, the key of whoredom and treason” (lxvi). Brooke’s stance on Catholicism is hardly worth disputing, whereas Shakespeare’s is much more ambiguous, but it seems significant that Shakespeare chose to keep what he did of Brooke’s religious setting—using it in ways even Brooke didn’t think to do. In a world where Protestantism was upheld by many to be the only true form of Christianity, the Catholic language in *Romeo and Juliet* must have evoked strong connotations of sin and false religion.

This becomes most evident when the actual text of the homilies is seen next to *Romeo and Juliet*’s dialogue, first in the party scene and then at the balcony. When they first meet, their words form a sonnet, a combined tribute to a love that is couched in idolatrous Catholic imagery:

ROMEO If I profane with my unworthiest hand
This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this:
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, did ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

JULIET Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;
For saints have hands that pilgrims’ hands do touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmers’ kiss.

ROMEO Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

JULIET Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

ROMEO Oh, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do:
They pray; grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

JULIET Saints do not move, though grant for prayer’s sake.

5. Prescott says that “the exact social composition of early modern England can never be known, but historians are in broad agreement that the gentry and aristocracy formed a small minority and that the common populace...comprised as much as 95 per cent of the population,” and points out that the open-air Globe must have been supported mainly by the common people (271).

ROMEO Then move not while my prayer's effect I take.
(1.4.204-219)

Romeo's first words to Juliet suggest she is his idol, since she is a "holy shrine" to which he must make a pilgrimage (1.4.205). We find out four times over the next lines that she is a picture specifically of a "saint" (1.4.210, 212, 214, 217). Significantly, this language is not included in Brooke's poem, as anti-Catholic as he is. Shakespeare makes a point of adding the imagery, and it raises all of the theological alarm bells that Elizabethan Protestants were taught to look out for. In a homily on prayer, Cranmer asks,

What man is so grosse, but he well vnderstandeth that these things are onely proper to him which is omnipotent, and knoweth all things, euen the very secrets of the heart, that is to say, onely and to GOD alone, whereof it followeth, that we must call neither vpon Angel, nor yet vpon Saint, but only and solely vpon GOD, as Saint Paul doeth write (Romans 10.14)?
("The Second Part of the Homily Concerning Prayer")

Protestants were adamant that citizens should pray to God alone, since God alone is able to answer: appealing to anyone else is at best useless and at worst idolatrous. *The Norton Shakespeare* acknowledges this in a note stating that "the Elizabethan Anglican Church held that the worship of such images was blasphemy" and that "to an English audience...Romeo's description of his love could sound like idolatry" (983), but the implications of the idea are never explored in the edition. In Catholicizing the language of this passage, Shakespeare must have roused an undeniable sense in his audience that Romeo and Juliet's idolatrous love is tied to—or even rooted in—the Church of Verona.

This happens again in the balcony scene, where Shakespeare uses similar imagery. Juliet is again called a "saint" (2.1.97), and she says that Romeo is "the god of [her] idolatry" whom she will "believe," if he swears by himself that he will be true to her (2.1.157). Cranmer's language from the same homily directly condemns Juliet's: "to say that we should beleue either in Angel or Saint or in any other liuing creature, were mere horrible blasphemie against GOD and his holy Word."

The connection to Cranmer might seem a coincidence unless we note at how many other points Shakespeare directly echoes the Reformer. Earlier in the same scene the lovers debate the significance of their names, trying to escape the patronyms that bind them to opposed families. Catherine Belsey says in "The Name of the Rose in Romeo and Juliet" that their goal is to "exist as unnamed selves" (133). But this is not quite right. While the lovers certainly want to remain hidden from the society of Verona and to escape constricting patronyms, their rejection of names is

more an act of rebellion against societal structures—and against a Protestant God—than a search for namelessness. We can see this in Juliet's command that Romeo "be some other name" (2.1.84), words that indicate she seeks not an unnamed lover but simply a lover that is named something other than Romeo Montague. Romeo's response in 2.1.92-94 explains what is going on spiritually here when we see it in relation to Cranmer:

I take thee at thy word.
Call me but "love," and I'll be new baptized:
Henceforth I never will be Romeo.

Immediately after his pronouncement that belief in angels and saints is blasphemy, Cranmer writes that "we are expressly taught in the word of the Lord onely to repose our Faith in the blessed Trinitie, in whose only Name we are also Baptized, according to the expresse commandement of our Sauour Iesus Christ, in the last of S. Matthew (Matthew 28.19)." Romeo does not mention in whose name he plans to be baptized, but it seems safe to suspect it is not the name of "the blessed Trinity," since over the course of the scene he will jump at the chance to swear his love to Juliet "by [his] gracious self" (2.1.155). In announcing a new baptism for himself, Romeo is willing to give up not only his own name but also the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.⁶

A third echo of Cranmer comes from a different homily, specifically on idolatry. Cranmer writes,
Take heed therefore diligently vnto your soules, you saw no manner of Image...least peradventure thou lifting vp thine eyes to heauen, doe see the Sunne and the Moone, and the Starres of heauen, and so thou, being deceiued by errour, shouldest honour, and worship them which the Lord thy GOD hath created to serue all Nations that be vnder heauen.
("Homily Against Peril of Idolatry")

Celestial imagery is rampant throughout the play, most memorably when Romeo calls Juliet "the sun" (2.1.45) and her eyes "the fairest stars in all the heaven" (2.1.57). His worship of her is tied to a worship expressly forbidden by the homilies. Additionally, Cranmer's emphasis on the purpose of the sun, moon, and stars—to serve all nations—works against many other instances of celestial imagery in

6. A clarification ought to be made here that a Catholic theologian would not accept this baptism any more than a Protestant would—in many points of theology, both traditions stand on the same ground and reject the same heresies. For the Reformers, however, Catholicism represented the slippage from true worship to idolatry. In the tumult of the Reformation, it would have been understood that Romeo and Juliet set themselves up for this blasphemy from the moment they invoked Catholic notions of sainthood, holiness, and iconography. The problem comes with the Catholic framing of the issue and not with the Catholic theological stance.

the play, especially when the stars are blamed for the fate of the lovers (Prologue 0.5) and when Juliet gives her monologue after the death of Tybalt:

Give me my Romeo; and, when I shall die,
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night
And pay no worship to the garish sun. (3.2.25)

At times the lovers consider the heavenly bodies to be sovereignly against them, and at other times they consider each other equal in beauty and transcendence to the sun and stars. According to Cranmer, however, celestial bodies are meant to serve the nations rather than govern them. In treating the sun and stars as sovereign entities, Romeo and Juliet give undue “honour” to both the celestial bodies and each other and scapegoat their own folly onto an impersonal, godless vision of the universe. Unfortunately for them, Shakespeare and his audience would both have recognized the unReformed implications of such a move.

Conclusion

After these examples, it seems appropriate to assume Shakespeare had Cranmer’s words in mind as he wrote, intentionally having the lovers do the opposite of what a Protestant is supposed to do. Strikingly, Cranmer writes in “The Homily Against Peril of Idolatry” that “they that loue such euill things [idols], they that trust in them, they that make them, they that fauour them, and they that honour them, are all worthy of death.” Romeo and Juliet embody this idea from beginning to end. They follow a “religion of the eye,” as Barbara Parker describes it (160), putting themselves before morality or society and at the same time mirroring the sins of their households. They worship both each other and themselves, calling on and believing in each other as they would an icon of an angel or a saint. They even seem to *become* idols at the end, as they are raised up into exactly the kind of golden statues that made the Reformers squirm. Their deaths, harsh as they may seem, are deserved, in Cranmer’s eyes. It seems hard to believe the noisy Protestant audiences of the time would miss this fact.⁷

7. Naseeb Shaheen states that church services in Elizabethan England “were not the dignified, sober occasions they are today... Disorders that bordered on the ridiculous took place within the church” (48). Several brawls and disruptions are described and then Shaheen concludes that “if the normal Elizabethan churchgoer seems disrespectful and unruly by our standards, he was especially inclined to be so while listening to a sermon which he found objectionable” (49). Considering that these Elizabethan churchgoers were the same people who watched Shakespeare’s plays, it seems reasonable to suppose that anti-Protestant theology was noticed, if not jeered, just as enthusiastically in the theater.

Seeing Romeo and Juliet as laudable, tragic individualists, Balty neglects to explore the long (albeit sidelined) tradition of blaming their downfall on their idolatrous relationship.⁸ Because of this, he comes to the wrong conclusion when, referencing David Bevington, he says that “Shakespeare affirms [Juliet’s decision to desire Romeo] through the beauty of the lovers’ language in their four scenes together” (133). Shakespeare condemns Juliet’s decision just as much as Brooke does, only with more subtlety. But Balty and Bevington are right to mention the beauty of the lovers’ language. If there is one idea Shakespeare explores in far greater depth than Brooke, it is the alluring nature of temptation. Romeo and Juliet are not foolish, unrelatable caricatures we can easily condemn, but are instead people living in a world where sinful things can look beautiful and a person who does not study carefully can be led astray. Perhaps this was how Shakespeare felt about Catholicism: he may have been attracted to it and its presentation of beauty, may have seen and admired the Renaissance iconography and the stunning cathedrals. It’s possible he even held to it at some later point in his career,⁹ but at least at the time of writing *Romeo and Juliet*, it seems that he heeded Cranmer’s words. Romeo and Juliet’s love, though breathtakingly attractive, must end in death because of its idolatry. It seems the Reformation had a wider reach than even Balty is willing to admit.

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8. W. H. Auden, for instance, wrote in 1958.

9. Bauregard’s work would be a good place to start in examining this.

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